POPULAR LIBRARY | 25c | 566

Love And Revenge In A Pagan Land

CRADLE OF THE SUN

John Clagett

Complete and Unabridged

Days Of The Conquistadors

Hot-blooded Juan de Moncada, fleeing the tortures of the Inquisition, finds in the New World a decadent race of savage rites and exotic women. How he saves a Mayan princess from the sadistic conquerors makes a story thrillingly alive with passionate adventure and barbaric splendor.

"The lustful, cruel, wanton destruction of the Spanish conquest of Yucatan . . . a thrilling story."
New Haven REGISTER

FROM THE **REVIEWS**

"Working against a panoramic background, John Clagett has produced in CRADLE OF THE SUN a historical romance of considerable impressiveness . . . achieves a notable depth in the plumbing of varying emotions as the characters of the drama play out their successive roles . . . Richly caparisoned as a costume narrative . . . intensely interesting book."

New York TIMES

"One of history's most tragic and cruel areas has been chosen by John Clagett as the setting for this, his first novel. . . . With an accurate eye on history, Mr. Clagett has injected a fictitious hero who becomes just as real as the authentic characters in his novel . . . It seems to this reviewer that John Clagett has carved a future for himself in the literary world."

Columbia RECORD

"John Clagett has portrayed an adventurous figure in a strange environment. Maya life is well-illustrated here in an exciting story which ought to be filmed to show the elaborately-described setting."

Columbia MISSOURIAN

"The best descriptive passages in the book deal with Urbino's use of the Inquisition to destroy the Moncada family. The reader can almost hear the heavy breathing of men, the shuffle of feet, the clank of iron. He can visualize the boot of iron and the thumbscrew."

Louisville COURIER-JOURNAL

"Here is a good swashbuckling novel dealing with the period of Inquisition in Spain. . . . For the reader who likes his history generously spiced with fiction, this will be most entertaining. It is filled with romance and adventure, and is surely an easy book to read."

Abilene MORNING REPORTER NEWS

AN HISTORICAL NOVEL

CRADLE OF THE SUN

John Clagett

POPULAR LIBRARY · NEW YORK

POPULAR LIBRARY EDITION

Published in March, 1954
Copyright, 1952, by John Clagett
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 52-10771
Published by arrangement with Crown Publishers, Inc.

Crown edition published in September, 1952

All POPULAR LIBRARY books are carefully selected by the POPULAR LIBRARY Editorial Board from the lists of the country's major book publishers, and represent fiction and non-fiction titles by the world's greatest authors.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
All Rights Reserved

TO

Donald Kennicott for beginnings
Paul Reynolds for encouragement and direction
Marjorie Clagett for inspiration

This is their book

"Yet let us take courage, illustrious nobles and chieftains, true friends and loyal subjects, let us aspire to that heaven, where all is eternal and corruption cannot come. The horrors of the tomb are but the Cradle of the Sun, and the dark shadows of death are brilliant lights for the stars."

Nezahualcoyotl, King of Tezcuco, 1425

CHAPTER 1

One moment walls, towers and roof tops lay in the cold grayness of early morning; the next, the sun had risen above the far-off mountains and flooded the valley with light. The old town seemed to stretch and come awake as smoke from kitchen fires drifted straight into a windless sky.

A small detachment of cavalry filled the stableyard of the town's largest inn with color, noise and crackling oaths. Men cursed sleepily, tightened saddle girths and watched their two officers in the center of the commotion. One officer was a burly man with coarse black hair and a careless, good-natured face; the other, a younger man, with long hair and a thread of a mustache. The elder looked from time to time at the entrance to the yard.

"Where the hell can Moncada be?" he grumbled. "The kitchen wench said he had breakfast an hour ago."

"So she did. He must be . . . Hey. Here he comes now."

A horse clattered into the stableyard and pushed its way through to the two officers. It carried a whistling man who grinned as he swung from his saddle close in front of them. He was a young man, well built and of middle height. He had short-cropped blond hair, blue eyes and a clean-shaved, well-tanned face.

"God's teeth!" said the older officer. "Look at him! Here I am with my belly wambling and kecking and my head pounding from the wine we drank last night, and here is that

rascal Moncada as gay as a bridegroom. How can that be, Juan? You drank at least as much as I did."

"Happiness, Tomás, happiness," said Juan Moncada, laughing. "I'm happy to be back in Spain, happy to see snow-topped mountains and smell sage, happy to have a beautiful girl waiting for me not far away."

"Waiting? And you two years in Italy? Like my old grandfather. Young women don't wait that long for a man, my boy."

"Tcha. Thank you for nothing, Father Tomás."

The war in Italy was over, and these soldiers had nearly reached their homes. The three officers were still in campaign dress. They could have had finer clothes in Cadiz, but they chose to travel in the high boots, the thick wool trunks and the soft leather doublets of the soldier. If the leather doublets showed rust streaks from armor and were shiny from the rubbing of breast and back plate, well, so much the better.

"Where've you been this time of day, Juan?" said Tomás.

"Believe it or not, Tomás, in church. I had some thanks to offer and some vows to renew, and the Church of Saint James here has a very fine relic."

"So? What is it?"

"One of the thirty pieces of silver paid to Judas for betraying our Lord."

Tomás' smile gave way to a look of reverent wonder, and he and Juan crossed themselves.

"I wish I had time to go and see it," said Tomás, "but it's a long way to Cordova. What say we get on top of the road?"

Commands cracked through the stableyard, and horses grunted as they felt the weight of men's bodies. Steel hoofs rang on the cobblestones. Two maidservants ran from the kitchen door and waved and cried good-byes. From an upper window, another girl waved a closed fist, her thumb between her two first fingers, and shouted in the strong Andalusian accent:

"That for Tenorio Hernandez! And little good may it do him!"

The men shouted with laughter.

"The fig, the fig! Hah! Hernandez, art getting old?"

"Forward," called Tomás, and the detachment moved from the stableyard. The voices and the sounds of hoofs faded away leaving the inn yard quiet once more. Inside the inn men pulled bedclothes from around their heads, sighed with relief and went to sleep again.

The soldiers rode down the narrow street. Many of them crossed themselves as they passed a church which had statues of St. Peter and St. Paul on the doorposts and a band of angels over the lintel.

"That's not the one with the relic," said Juan, seeing Tomás hesitate. "It's across town."

They kept to the center of the street, since this was the hour when most people were getting out of bed and unsavory showers cascaded now and again from upper windows, preceded only by the briefest warning shout. Soon, they were out of town. They turned in their saddles to look back at its Moorish walls, its turreted castle.

"Why don't you stay the night in Seville, Tomás?" asked Juan. "It's only six leagues. I'll help show you the town."

"Hah! It could be that there is a lady waiting for *me,* in Cordova. You're not the only lover, Juan."

"Hmm. As you so recently said, young women don't wait two years. This waiting lady must be old. A favorite aunt, perhaps?"

"I bite my thumb at you, Moncada. Thus."

They were riding through a shallow valley, through meadows where the famous horses and bulls of the district grazed. Then the road angled up over the low hills, past terraced vineyards onto rocky slopes where the gray-green olive trees grew, and then to the top of the hill crowned with oak and chestnut. They stopped to rest their horses a moment.

To the west the hills fell away to a plateau spotted with orange groves and palmetto. In the distance was the Guadalquiver River with its wide belt of marsh. Juan turned in the saddle to look behind him. Utrera had lost its ugly details to distance and become a romantic, turreted city. Beyond it was another fold of hills and beyond that the snow-touched peaks of the Sierra Ronda. Farther yet, as though floating above the rim of the earth, were the white masses of the Sierra Nevada.

"Ah!" said Juan. "Look at that. That's Spain. By God, but it's good to be back again!"

As Juan rode, he whistled the tune he'd heard some serenading lover sing the night before. He'd said that he was happy, but that was an ineloquent way to describe the bracing surge of joy that welled up in him. Home! He thought fondly of his parents: of his still beautiful mother; of his white-haired father who was still young enough to enjoy a hard chase.

Soon he'd be close to Alisa! Three miles from his father's

house was the Casa Montejo. Juan thought back to the well-thumbed memory of the single occasion on which he'd been alone with Alisa since she had become a woman. It had been on the river bank; her chaperone had given them grace and disappeared for about as long as ten deep breaths would last a man. There had been no promise, but he had felt her lips part a little under his.

This time that memory made him urge his horse to a faster trot. He grinned when he realized it, pulled him in a little, and turned to look at his companions. Tomás rode steadily and quietly with a serious face. Juan reached over and slapped his thigh.

"Ho, Tomás! Why so serious? Aren't you glad to be nearly home?"

"Glad? To be sure. I'll be happy for awhile, but I'll soon be wanting to be off again. Hell's fire, Juan, a man can't chop out a name and fortune by sitting at home."

"Where do you think you'll go? No war in Italy, at the moment. You could go fight the Moors, maybe, but there are hard knocks and little profit in that."

The men were quite close behind them. Tomás half-turned in his saddle and spoke loudly, so they could hear.

"You're taking the wrong sow by the ear, Juan. No Italy for me. I'm thinking of leading a few good lads to the new world."

The soldiers rode still closer, interest on every face. Mention of the Indies was a sure way to reach men's ears.

"I see," said Juan. "Well, good luck to you."

One of the soldiers joined respectfully in the talk.

"I heard in Cadiz that soldiers in Santa Domingo can pick up gold and silver in the fields. Is that so, Captain?"

"So I'm told, Fernan," replied Tomás. "Myself, I think it's an exaggeration. I think perhaps one must dig a little for it, or maybe wash it from stones taken out of the bottoms of streams. But there's no doubt the gold is there."

"Dig, eh?" said another soldier. "No matter. I'm told every Spaniard has a score of Indians for slaves. May old Nick rock my cradle if I don't go and see!"

"Right, by Judas!" said Fernan. "A man may be only a poor damned pike-dragger here, but out there he's a nobleman, in a manner of speaking, Captain Moncada, begging your pardon, with slaves and followers."

"They say the girls are pretty, too, and that a man can have all of them he wants."

The last speaker licked his lips.

"Burn my beard, Tenorio, from the way that wench gave you the fig a while ago, I'd think you were past caring about women. But you're right about the Indies! A man who has just returned told me you go out of the town, see a wench, clip her up and there you are. That's what he said."

"Aye," said another. "And there are fruits that would make a saint sin in Lent, and strange animals and flowers and sights. They would be good to see."

"Holy Mary!" said Fernan. "You take the flowers, Lopez. I'll take the gold and the women. Hah! There's a combination to make a man happy. How about wine? One must have wine. Wine, women and gold!"

"You've all heard rightly," said Tomás. "But most of all there are new lands. There are said to be golden cities and great countries where brave men can make a kingdom of their own. That's why I'm going. Anyone interested?"

He smiled with pleasure at the quick response.

"Good! I'll keep you all in mind. We're most of us Cordovans, lads, and I'll get to you if the opportunity comes."

The men fell back again, and talked with animation about the New World.

"'S'life, Tomás," said the third officer. "I think I'll come along too."

"You'll never regret it, José. There's plenty of room for a young man. No old, rich bastards to bow down to and flatter. A man's his own there. Juan, lad, you're a good, experienced soldier. How about you? Will you come help us found a kingdom?"

"Not for me, boys," said Juan, serenely.

"Eh? And why not?"

"This. All this." Juan moved his hand in a circle. "This is world enough for me: Spain to live in, a Spanish lady to love, and France and Italy for a battlefield. World enough for me. This is my place."

Tomás shook his head sadly.

"Sounds like he's got the love fever, José."

"Aye. Isn't it sad? The Señorita Alisa de Montejo, perhaps?"

"And don't I know it," said Tomás. "When he used to be my lieutenant before the general was foolish enough to give him a troop of his own, I grew weary of Alisa. He talked of her even in his sleep. See! Just the mention of her name, and he pricks up his ears like a sow in the beans."

"So, no new world for our Juan. But how about the gold, man? You'll miss that."

"I'll get gold enough here, comrades, while you go rambling up and down like vagabonds looking for a better bread than is made of wheat. You'd best remember that lots of people go out after wool and come home with their own fleece clipped, my sweet innocent little sheep. Black sheep."

"But the women, Juan! The slim Indian girls. The men are not lying about that. You have a dozen at a time."

"I should have said 'goats,'" said Juan. "I've seen dark girls enough in Italy. No. For me, a lady with bronze hair, skin like the snow on the Sierra Nevada yonder and nipples like small pink rosebuds."

"How poetic," said Tomás mockingly. "Can't you make them strawberries?"

"By my life!" said José. "Now I know why Juan was always looking for blondes in Italy. But what have we here? A procession?"

José had noticed the dust of approaching travelers, but he had paid no attention to it at first, thinking it was only a train of mules being driven from Seville to the coast. Now the loud talk and laughter quieted as the officers and men looked silently at what rode past.

Three mounted soldiers were followed on foot by two brutal-looking men dressed in dark clothes, each with a whip in his hand. Behind them followed a long string of mournful figures, chained together. Two more guards with whips brought up the rear of the train.

The men in chains each wore a soiled, dusty red and yellow robe, ornamented with crosses, tears and flames. Their faces were tragic, and they shuffled along the road like dull animals. Tomás whistled.

"Looks like the Inquisition's been busy. Thirty if there's a one. Look, there's even a woman. I'd have thought these were galley slaves. Ea, Sergeant, a fine troop you have here."

The underofficer leading the train saluted and reined in his horse. Behind him the long string of slaves huddled into a group, their eyes on the ground, their feet moving in an almost mechanical march even when they came to a halt.

"God, such cattle!" said one of the guards on foot, swinging his whip carelessly. "Hold there, you! Stop walking and open your eyes."

"To the galleys?" asked Tomás.

"Yes, your worship," said the sergeant. "We're taking them to Cadiz, to the barracks there. God's beard! A nasty job for a soldier, Captain. It's not what I'd choose, but I suppose someone must do it."

"That's right, Sergeant. Why the woman? Women don't go to the galleys."

"Eh? Oh, that one. She's not chained; she's just going with her man. He's sent for life. I guess she hasn't any place to go. One of the Inquisition's men told me their two children died in the dungeons. I thought it wouldn't do any harm to let her follow along. Do you think it's all right, Captain?"

"I suppose so. It doesn't much matter where she goes. When was the auto-da-fé?"

"Two months ago. A good show, too. Five were sent to the stake. You know, there's getting to be more all the time."

"Too bad we missed it, but I guess there'll be another one soon. Thanks, Sergeant. Go with God."

The sergeant clucked to his horse. Behind him the guards cracked their long whips over the shoulders of the galley slaves and the line moved slowly forward.

"Still in their Sanbenitos," said José.

"They'll lose them in the galleys," said Juan. "I suppose after a day or so naked in the sun, they'd be glad even for a Sanbenito on their shoulders."

He looked down at the prisoners as they passed. Heretics. Men who had insulted God and the church with foul practices. Jews or Moors. Men who had questioned the words of the church. As the woman walked by Juan, walking dumbly by her husband, she looked up at him with dark, tragic eyes like those of a suffering animal. Juan crossed himself hastily, hoping she didn't have the evil eye. Then he remembered. Of course, she couldn't have been a witch or they would have burned her. He rode on, reassured.

For a time the cavalcade was not so gay. These men all knew themselves to be true Spaniards and Christians, but . . . one might have an enemy; drunk, one might say an indiscreet thing. Men crossed themselves, rode on, and the brief shadow passed away.

The road followed the ridge of the long low hills for some miles, then gradually descended into the flat country below. But before the road left the crest of the hills, Juan stopped his horse and stood in his stirrups.

"I thought we could see it from here," he said. "Look. There's Seville."

Miles away the silver shine of the Guadalquiver River looped into a great bend around an island of greenery which made the white and red walls, the towers and roofs of Seville stand out in bold contrast. A thin haze of smoke rose very high into the blue sky. Towering alone above the city was

the spire of the new cathedral and the lower, square outlines of the Girelda.

"That, by God, is home," said Juan, breathing deeply.

A league from Seville the road forked. The right fork was the road to Cordova.

"Well, Juan, here we part. I wish we were as near home as you."

"But you are, Tomás. Come, stay the night."

"No. Got to reach Cordova tomorrow. But I'll be down to see you. And remember, in Cordova, my house is yours."

Though eager to get on, Juan sat his horse at the cross-roads until the last sign of the troop, except for the dust, had vanished. He and Tomás had seen some warm work together in the past two years. Juan turned his horse's head toward Seville, and spurred the animal into a gallop.

The road led between orange groves. As Juan drew near the walls of Seville, the taverns increased in number. He saluted the Meseta Tavern where he'd had many a cup of wine after a hunt. Juan's way led only through the eastern suburb of Seville, outside the walls. The city could wait. Home lay ahead, but he blew a light-hearted kiss toward the city as he passed, remembering the friends, the lovers, the griefs and the joys he had known there. His home was in the village of Marchena, three miles north of the city, perched on a ridge of hills with the great river curving below it.

There was a curious reluctance to have the long journey end, now that he was almost home. He rode through vineyards, then olive groves. Finally, the ancient beech and chestnut appeared and the broom and furze. And there were the roofs of Marchena. It was a small place, like a thousand other villages in Spain, but to Juan it had the special memories, the special smells and sights of his boyhood. There was the church. He'd see Father Villegas soon, no doubt, for his mother would hurry him off for prayers and candles before he got the dust off his back. The stones of the plaza were under his horse's hoofs. The square was deserted except for a number of roving chickens and a flock of pigeons. It was four o'clock, the dinner hour. No wonder the place was quiet. In the center of the plaza was a roofed well and across from the church were two taverns and some shops and stalls. Around this center there were only a few score houses and then the open fields.

A blind force hurried him down the last quarter mile of the road. There! There it was, red-roofed, white, long, low —not a grand place, but dear to him after two years of war

and wandering. The Casa Moncada. As he turned his horse into the courtyard, he heard a high, clear cry of joy and looked up to see his mother running to him.

"My son, my son!" she cried. She ran into Juan's arms. He lifted her from her feet in a flurry of skirts as she kissed him and cried and kissed him again. There came a roar from the doorway. Juan looked up to see his father, holding his table knife and napkin.

"Isabel!" he roared. "What makes you fly from the table like a chicken before a fox, leaving a man in the middle of . . . In the name of God! Juan!"

He dropped napkin and knife and ran into the courtyard. Juan went to meet him and felt his father's hard, old arms. Don Miguel's scarred, seamed face was alight with joy.

"By God, son! I'm proud of you! The general himself wrote us after your promotion in the field a year ago. He told us of your success, of your wound and how well you'd done. Said—by God!—that was what all the world had come to expect of a Moncada. You do credit to your name, man! About that battle now. Tell me about it. I heard that . . . But wait! Where is Juan Valera? My son, don't tell me Valera is . . ."

Juan saw the fear and pain in his father's face and answered quickly.

"Valera's all right, father. He follows with our baggage and most of the troop in a later ship. I got a place in a fast galley with despatches. He'll be here inside a month. I'll never be able to tell you what he's been to me in the last two years—friend, teacher, guard, nurse, everything."

"Say 'comrade' and you cover it all, son. He has been all that and more to me, time and again. Well, well, I feel a man again. For a moment I feared . . . But now, the battle. Tell me. I heard that the Venetian right wing . . ."

"Miguel, stop this instant! Juan must be famished and the food is getting cold. Not another word about battles, here or at the table. I, too, have things to ask Juan, but I'll wait. Are you hungry, Juanito?"

Juan laughed, swung his mother from her feet again, whirled her around as she laughed, put her on her feet, bowed deeply and said:

"Your arm, my lady. May I have the honor of escorting you to dinner?"

They moved in, in great state, to greet the smiling servants.

Half an hour later, Juan sighed, put down his knife and

wiped the good gravy from his mouth. He eyed a fragment of chicken-breast cooked with olives in wine and shook his head.

"I've dreamed of it, madame mother," he said. "And it's better than I dreamed."

"I've dreamed of having you in your place again, son," she said.

Her face and figure were still young in many ways though her hair was gray. She had declared that it was a shame for a woman to grow fatter than her husband, and since Don Miguel refused to produce a paunch, she refused also.

"Stuffing like a pig," grumbled Don Miguel, putting down an empty glass. "Now, if madame will permit, perhaps we might hear about that battle. You say . . ."

"Don Miguel!" said Isabel. "For shame. You yourself vowed twelve candles to Saint Juan the instant you heard that our son was safely back in Spain. He is here, and you sit, wanting to talk of battles. We are going to church. I, too, have candles to light. Juan, your good black and red suit is ready in your room. It would look well on you though you have grown! Shoulders and chest . . . My boy has become a man. I hate to see that scar on your face! Did it . . . Never mind. I won't think of it. Put on your suit, my son."

"A fine discipline I keep in my house," grumbled Don Miguel. "My wife orders me about like a servant. And I'll swear to God, I haven't finished a sentence since my son came home. One day, madame, you will drive me too far. Remember, son, and take warning. A woman and a drum are alike. Neither can be beaten too much." He glared at his wife, but his blue eyes twinkled, and she made a face at his pretended anger. "But one thing I demand," he went on. "No coxcomb clothes for a soldier's first home visit to church. Keep on the clothes you wear, my son. You wore them in battle. So wear them in church. This is no exhibition churchgoing for the girls. And speaking of girls, did you have a good time in Italy? I remember one well-trussed, strapping wench in Milano. Hah! A better woman never stepped on two legs. A little free with her hips, maybe, but . . ."

Again he didn't finish his sentence.

The village church was small and simple but it took Juan closer to God than the vaulted immensity of the cathedral in Seville. Father Villegas came to greet them at the door, his eyes alight with pleasure at the sight of Juan.

"May God be blessed for this day! Our son Juan home from the war. Isabel, my daughter, Don Miguel, my friend, did I not tell you so? Come into this house of God and give thanks to those who deserve them."

He prayed with them. Before long the darkness near the altar was dispelled by the clear white light of wax candles. Juan felt the tensions, the miseries of war, its blood and anguish, dropping from him as he knelt and the quiet peace of the little church entered his soul.

Father Villegas walked with them to the door.

"No, children," he said. "I won't come to your house tonight. You should be alone together these first hours. I'll stay here and add my thanks to yours."

"At least, Father, I'll see you at Mass in the morning," said Juan, replacing his cap.

"Hah! Do you think so? No, Juan, your mother will want to parade her hero son at the cathedral in Seville."

"For a priest, Father Villegas, you know women well," said Don Miguel.

"And why not? The beauty of women is like a hot fire or a sharp sword: those who come close only get burned or cut. The priest can stay a little off and study them."

"Ah, but there are some things you'll never learn about them that way," said Don Miguel. "Eh, Isabel?"

Juan woke the next morning glad to be home and glad of the season. Since it was winter there was no need to wait until evening to call on Alisa. During the insufferable heat of summer a gentleman could hardly make a social call before nine o'clock in the evening. After late Mass he could take a turn or two around the Court of Oranges, perhaps have a glass of wine, and arrive at the Casa Montejo at precisely the proper hour for a winter day's call.

Juan dressed with unusual care. His doublet was scarlet silk with a white, ruffled shirt underneath and lace at wrists and throat. His cap was black velvet with a scarlet feather; his cloak, black and gold; his trunks, black slashed with scarlet; and his high soft boots, red leather.

"Holy Mother Mary! How grand you look, Juan," said his mother, her eyes shining.

Don Miguel snorted, and complacently surveyed his own somber black, and muttered something about young roosters and gay plumes. They rode together to the cathedral. Isabel let all the world see her delight in her handsome son, but Don Miguel kept his face impassive. Still, his eyes shone with pride, and with the continued congratulations and com-

pliments of the great of Seville, they shone even brighter.

Juan was surprised to find himself getting bored with the extravagant compliments from people who had hardly noticed him before he had gone away to war two years earlier.

Shortly after noon he knocked loudly at the grilled gateway of the Casa Montejo. The old house was an immense, dull, square structure disfigured by the stains of age. Like all the great houses of Seville, its beauty was inside. Through the ornamental ironwork Juan could see the orange trees, the flower gardens and the white marble.

The major-domo arrived at the gate, bowed deeply at the Moncada name, called a groom to take Juan's horse and ushered him into the courtyard, up the marble walk. Through the orange trees on his right Juan saw a moving flash of color, but good manners demanded he remain with his guide. He studied the house which was colonnaded in the Moorish manner with arched galleries rising above them for several stories. He seemed to be surrounded by an endless number of fountains as well as extensive gardens.

The major-domo left Juan in a prim reception room, took his cap and cloak, and withdrew, leaving Juan to sit and listen to the hammering of his heart.

Juan grinned at the wait that followed. He knew it was carefully timed to show the proper degree of indifference by the great Montejo clan for a son of the distinguished—but not rich—military Moncadas. Probably, thought Juan, his exploits in Italy and his present fame in Seville had cut the time in half. Nor would Alisa be the first to appear after the long wait. He was willingly caught in the ritual of courtship and all the rules had to be obeyed to the letter.

At last Juan caught sight of black garments beyond the door. Then he heard the rustle of silk. He rose to his feet as a tall lady with the high-bridged Montejo nose swept through the doorway. Juan made his deepest bow and the lady answered with as deep a curtsy.

"Doña Teresa," said Juan, "I am overwhelmed by the honor of being received by so distinguished a lady." He bowed again.

"This house and all those in it are honored by the presence of so famous a soldier, Captain de Moncada." The lady smiled, curtsying again.

She was Francisco de Montejo's sister, who took the place of his dead wife as hostess and mother. Juan was rather surprised to feel so much warmth in her welcome. He hadn't expected as much.

Doña Teresa took a seat which allowed her to see into the garden. She approved Juan's bearing and manners immediately when he crossed the room and sat facing her. During the rather meaningless polite conversation which followed, she studied him: a handsome man, well dressed, well mannered, well set up; too bad about the scar on his face, but then, in a soldier that was more becoming than not. Good. Ideal for her purpose. She stole a look through the door to see if Alisa and Don Diego had come into sight as yet.

"A very gracious house," Juan was saying. "I saw none to match it, even in Venice. But what is the old proverb? To those God loves, He gives a house in Seville. I look about me now and know that to be true."

Doña Teresa thanked him for the compliment, feeling just a trifle sorry for him. Alisa's husband had already been chosen, and he was with her at that moment. Diego Urbino was one of the richest men in Seville and his close connections with the Inquisition made him an even more desirable son-in-law. But he was slow in taking the final step. This should help things along. Let Don Diego see this handsome young officer paying court to Alisa, and he would be spurred on a little, or else Teresa knew nothing of men! And Alisa? She was a docile girl and would do as her father commanded.

Juan dressed his impatience as pleasure and vivacity, but cursed convention behind his smile. What a wall of talk and restraint and watching were set up between a man and a woman! At last! Doña Teresa was standing up, looking past him into the garden. Juan leaped to his feet to assist her.

"There is Alisa now, Captain Moncada," said Doña Teresa. "Shall we join her in the garden?"

She accepted Juan's arm, and they walked into the patio. The garden, the house, the woman at his side, everything else was non-existent for Juan when he saw Alisa.

Glory of God, she was even more beautiful than he remembered! A ray of sun burnished her red-gold hair; her white gown left bare the first gentle swell of her bosom where her skin was as white as the material, touched only with a delicate pink. Juan looked into her eyes, which were hazel and suddenly wide with pleasure. He was so stunned by her beauty and absorbed in each delicate detail that he barely remembered to bow in response to her curtsy.

"Juan!" she said. Then, remembering her aunt, she quickly said, "Captain Moncada." The joy in her face and voice denied the second formality. "I'm delighted that you have returned safely to Seville. I saw your triumph at the cathe-

dral this morning, and after so much attention I hardly expected to see you here today."

Sweet liar! thought Juan to himself as he bent over her hand, and her eyes, when he looked into them again, told him he was justified. He released her hand reluctantly, sure that he felt a pressure from her fingers.

"Don Diego," said Doña Teresa. That's right, thought Juan. There was a man with her, wasn't there? "I believe that you know Captain Moncada."

"I know the family," said Don Diego, who was standing at Alisa's shoulder. "I have not yet had the honor of meeting the captain." The slight emphasis on the words "honor" and "captain" and the coldness in the voice made Juan examine the speaker more closely. He stared into very black eyes set in a thin-cheeked, pale face with a black mustache and fashionable goatee. The lips were thick and too red.

"In that case, Don Diego, may I have the honor of presenting Captain Juan de Moncada? Captain Juan de Moncada, Don Diego Urbino."

Ah! Now Juan knew him. He was the rich court favorite, and a familiar of the Inquisition. Don Miguel disliked him. So did Juan, now.

"I am honored," said Juan.

"Thank you," said Urbino, brusquely.

He and Juan exhanged cold bows and hot glances.

Here is an enemy, by God, thought Juan, looking into Urbino's face.

The exchange of searching looks went on for a few minutes, then Urbino wheeled, made his farewells to Alisa, to her aunt and her deunna, and departed.

Juan remembered then to pay his respects to Alisa's chaperone, Doña Luisa. She was his greatest hope of seeing Alisa alone. She was a plump lady with moist black eyes who remembered her own youth. Juan kissed her hand with fervor.

And then, at last, Juan was able to turn his attention to Alisa, who was smiling at him. Suddenly he knew she was thinking of their last meeting.

"Perhaps you would have the kindness to show me this magnificent garden, Señorita Alisa," he said. "In Italy I missed our Spanish flowers. It would be a great pleasure to see them at their best in the loveliest of company."

"Excellent," said Doña Teresa. "A little early, perhaps, for the best flowers, but already there are many worth seeing. I myself should enjoy a little walk. Luisa, you must show Captain Moncada those favorite camellias of yours."

"Why not invite the rest of the household?" said Juan to himself. But only pleasure showed on his face as he moved into the garden walks with two ladies too many.

The great patio was a peaceful, pleasant place. Pigeons waddled across the walks. Occasionally a flock would whirl into the air, make a short circle and light again. The smell of the first orange blossoms was heavy and sweet, and the splash of water in several of the fountains made an agreeable background. Juan soon found himself seated alone on a bench in one of the arbors. Across the arbor was Alisa with Doña Teresa on her right and Doña Luisa on her left. Alisa's face was calm and pleased but her slim fingers played desperately with her fan. Looking at her this way was half torture and half joy. He wanted desperately to touch her.

"Who will be left in Seville?" Doña Teresa was saying. "All one hears everywhere is talk of the Indies, talk of gold and jewels and cities with golden streets."

"Yes," said the chaperone. "Men are mad over the new world. What about you, Captain Moncada?"

"I stand with you, Doña Luisa. I'll stay in Spain. The loveliest and most desirable things in life are here."

He looked into Alisa's eyes as he spoke. She flushed slightly and looked down at her torn fan.

"The fever for this New World has touched even my brother, Don Francisco," said Alisa's aunt. "He has made a vow at the shrine of Saint James to conquer a new province for Spain and God. He considers that the new lands in the West offer the best opportunity." She sighed. "I should hate to leave this house."

"Eh?" said Juan, startled. "If the noble Don Francisco should go to the Indies with all his household, that would provide the only attraction that would take me from Europe." He put all his passion into the look he gave Alisa. "But I hope Don Francisco will reconsider. No land could be better than Spain. I hope to stay here. When war breaks out again in Italy—as it will within a year—I will go back for the campaign. I have been promised a company."

Alisa's aunt intercepted Juan's look. She realized that, after all, the young captain had done his job—most effectively, too, from the look on Don Diego's face—and that there was no use trying Alisa's docility too far. She stood up.

"Alisa, my dear, the hairdresser will be waiting. I'm sure the captain will excuse us."

Alisa looked surprised. For a moment there was a battle of eyes, then she, too, got up.

"Doña Luisa will accompany you to the door, Captain Moncada," said Doña Teresa. "This house has been honored by your visit. Please come again. The Casa Montejo is open at all times to so renowned a soldier. Come, Alisa."

Juan kissed Teresa's hand, then bent again over Alisa's. The soft hand moved under his lips, and he touched the bottom of the wrist tenderly with his fingertips. Then she was gone.

I've got to get her alone somehow, he thought. I know I've got to go through with this formality. I've got to please her father and get permission to make a formal courtship. All right, but I will have a few kisses!

"Alisa has become a lovely girl," said Doña Luisa.

She was smiling at him when he looked at her. She knew what he was thinking. Juan recovered himself at once.

"Only a very few years ago, Doña Luisa, I'm sure that Seville knew a young woman even lovelier, in you," he said, looking into her eyes. "I only regret the lateness of my birth. Alas, now I may only seek for the loveliest of my day." He kissed her hand and she looked pleased.

"Ah. Flatterer of an old woman! I know your plan, young man. Never think it. I wish . . . Here is Luis with your cloak."

"The Doña Teresa is most thoughtful," said Juan with a wry grin.

"Most thoughtful," agreed Luisa. "I shall escort you to the gate anyway."

"More honor than I deserve," said Juan. "Your arm, my lady."

She stood inside the gate and smiled at him as he rode away.

Juan had months of gaiety and pleasure ahead. As an officer back from war, commended, young, handsome and with a future, he was welcome everywhere. True, the Moncadas were not rich. Their estate had been granted Don Miguel only during his lifetime as a reward for past services to the crown. Still, Juan made a fine addition to a ball and many great houses were open to him. At this function or that, he met Alisa. One evening he was allowed to escort her to a masque. They were accompanied by the Doña Teresa and the Doña Luisa. Juan touched Alisa only in the formal dances, but he derived considerable pleasure from the glares of Diego Urbino.

Juan swore to himself as he rode through the night afterwards in the carriage with the three ladies, Alisa well sepa-

rated from him by the length of the carriage and the presence of two chaperones.

This is the way I have to do it, thought Juan during a lull in the talk. All right, by God!

But he remembered her lips and the feel of her breasts. Luisa was still friendly. Now was the time. He'd try to arrange another meeting at the old rendezvous and hope that Luisa would turn her back again. It had been done before and could be done again.

It took him a month to arrange it.

CHAPTER 2

Near Seville a brook hurrying toward the Guadalquiver River ran beneath a gray stone bridge. Below the bridge a point of land turned the brook's course. Even in February that point was screened by live oak and willows, and made an excellent meeting place for lovers. One of the most eager and expectant of that eager and expectant tribe perched momentarily on a large stone, his eyes fixed on the bridge. Alisa was late. What kept her? Her father?

Damn all fathers of beautiful girls!

Juan de Moncada got up from the stone, leaving across it his black cloak embroidered with three golden hawks. He paced. His black doublet, trunks and hose might have seemed funereal but for the long red feathers in his flat cap. Leaves rustled as he paced. He didn't notice. The brook murmured; the sky of southern Spain was bright blue. This beauty, too, went unnoticed. So did the sun, which was sinking low.

Did she mean never to come?

He frowned and his hand went automatically to the sword and dagger at his belt.

This was an important meeting. If she came, it would encourage Juan. Still, he knew that though Alisa's hazel eyes might glow when she saw him, in Spain it was the father who chose the husband. Juan's hopes lay in making Alisa's love for him so deep that her choice might have some influence on her father.

Now Juan heard the rhythmic clink of iron on stone. He ran to the brook's edge and looked up at the bridge. He saw a slender gray figure on a large black horse. Alisa! But ac-

companying this lover's vision was the expected black figure on a gray mule. No matter. Perhaps the duenna would stay discreetly near the road.

Juan walked toward the highway until he saw the gray cloak among the trees. He felt a sharp exultation: she came alone. He raced back into the clearing, into the secret spot he had chosen. As Alisa came close, she bent her head. She moved with an affection of languor. When she looked up, their eyes met.

"My lady!" cried Juan.

He hurried to her and took her hands. He drew her toward the stone. She looked up, then dropped her eyes again. Her steps lagged. Juan's campaign called for Alisa to sit down on the large stone he'd covered for her with his cloak, but when, holding very lightly to her arm, he tried to sit her there, she resisted. He removed his hand at once.

Alisa's red-gold hair against the gray cloth was like sunshine breaking through clouds. The high-laced bodice masked the bosom that ball gowns had so nearly revealed, but its uneven rise and fall betrayed her apparent calmness.

"Alisa, you've grown to be a lovely lady, so lovely that I can hardly believe you were once the long-legged girl who chased over the countryside on Midnight's back. I'm glad you still ride Midnight, Alisa, else little would remain of that girl who used, at times, to show a partiality for a certain Juan de Moncada. Your eyes are the same, my lady, your eyes and the horse you ride. Is there anything else unchanged? Do you remember those days, Señorita Alisa?"

"Of course I remember them, Juan. Yes, I remember how we rode together and how my duenna threatened to tell my father, but never did. Oh, Juan, do you remember the time I tried to make Midnight leap the brook? And how you pulled me from the water and didn't laugh at my fall?"

Alisa's shy reserve melted a little in the warmth of memory. She walked to the brook's edge as if to stare back into the past. Juan looked again at her beauty and was overwhelmed. Her lips were red; her skin faintly pink, and her waist slim. Her breasts must be round and firm. He admired them openly as he admired her face. He wanted to rush to her, but he remembered how he had rehearsed this scene in his mind, so he remained close by the rock. Soon, she went back to him there. He took her arm again, and when he almost absentmindedly pressed her gently toward the stone, she sat down without seeming to realize that she did so. Juan went down at once on one knee before her and took her hand.

"My lady," he said. "You ravish my heart. You turn my blood to fire with your beauty!" It was a stylized beginning, very popular, but it made Juan feel like a mountebank or a teller of romances. "Your . . . your eyes are as clear as the mountain sky, your waist as slim as the white candles before the altar and your heart as pure as the Virgin's. Look down. . . ." He faltered and stopped, reddening, his tongue groping for more of the stilted words. "God anoint me!" he suddenly roared. "Those are the words of a courtier, a perfumed fop! I am no courtier, Alisa. I am a soldier and must speak as one. I know only that wherever I look I see your face, and at night, when I would sleep, I lie thinking of you, wanting you. A soldier of Spain shouldn't fear death, but every time I went into battle, Alisa, I was afraid, thinking that if I died, I shouldn't see you again, could never be your lover and have and hold you for my own. Listen to me, Alisa!"

Alisa smiled down at him, her eyes bright, warm color in her cheeks. He kissed the back of her hand, turned it over and kissed the soft palm lingeringly. She touched his head lightly. He shifted with agility to her side, and slipped his arm around her waist. She didn't pull away very decisively.

"Señor de Moncada!" she said, breathlessly. "Juan, you . . ."

He heard her breathlessness and found no harshness in her formality. He was breathless himself. A hot glow ran through him, and life was good. He had to know, he had to make the great cast and find out now.

"Alisa," he said. "Alisa, I love you. I'll always love you!"

She started to get up. Juan held her, turned her face toward his and kissed her lips. At first they were stiff. Then they softened and warmed, and she returned his kiss. He pulled her to him and pressed her body to his as he kissed her again. His hand moved from her shoulder to her breast. He closed his hand on it, sinking in it, drowning in it. Her hand covered his and pressed it closer to her breast.

"Alisa! My sweetheart, my darling, my love. Will you be my lady?"

He felt her start. She pushed him away a little and looked into his face. When she saw eagerness and love there, she let him see her joy.

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes, Juan, yes! I love you. I've always been your lady in my dreams, and now I'll be your lady awake, awake and asleep and forever."

Juan's planned campaign had gone no further than this.

His imagination hadn't carried him beyond acceptance, but he knew instinctively that this was no time to stop his advance. He kissed her again, bending her yielding body back on the stone. His hand fumbled at the laces of her bodice, loosened them and slipped beneath the dress. Suddenly Alisa disengaged her lips.

"Juan!" she whispered. "Juan, what are you doing?"

"This," said Juan, and he removed the laces, pulled the bodice wide and kissed her soft breasts. As he tasted her sweetness, she sighed softly and stroked his hair.

Suddenly she jerked herself free.

"Juan! Someone's coming. Luisa's coming! Quick, Juan!"

Juan jumped to his feet just as the duenna came puffing into the clearing. Her face was red and she looked nervous and alarmed.

"Good day, Doña Luisa," said Juan, sweeping her his deepest bow. He retrieved his cap which had slipped to the ground, settled it virtuously on his head. Alisa was standing several yards away gazing at the brook. When she turned, the only sign of her confusion was her heightened color and the slight tremor of her hands. She was partly glad, partly disappointed at the interruption. She forced herself not to look down at the hurriedly adjusted laces of her bodice.

"We must go, Alisa," said the duenna indignantly. "You said you'd bring the gentleman out to the road at once. What would your father say? Holy Saints! What would happen to me if he should learn of this indiscretion?"

"He'll never know, Doña Luisa," said Alisa. "Go back now. I'll come at once." The duenna hesitated. Alisa stamped her foot. "Did you hear me, Luisa? I'll come directly after you."

Doña Luisa started toward the road at once. As soon as she was out of sight, a smile replaced her look of indignation. Ea! But that had been a pretty sight! It made her feel young again. In her day, ah . . . She smiled again. The eager young ones. How they'd sprung apart.

"I really must go now, Juan," said Alisa.

"I suppose you must," said Juan, regretfully. "Will you meet me here tomorrow, my darling?"

"Yes, Juan, if I can get away. Today it was easy. Father is hunting. I'll try to be here at four o'clock tomorrow.

They kissed again. While Juan tried to hold the hurrying moments back, Alisa fixed her laces. Finally they walked slowly toward the road.

Juan was flushed, excited and very happy. This was real

love, he told himself. This was his life's love, and there was only one step left to take to make sure that she was his for life.

"Alisa, I'll have to speak to your father at once. I will ask his permission to pay my court to you."

"Oh," said Alisa, stopping short. "So soon? I'd thought . . . But perhaps it's best. He talks a great deal about Don Diego Urbino. . . ." She blushed delicately. "I have always changed the subject, but he brings it up again and again. My father seems as fascinated by the tales of the new world as a young adventurer, and he and Urbino are planning some sort of expedition there. They're together a great deal these days."

"I'll see him today," said Juan. "When will he get back from his hunt?"

"Perhaps today would be a good time, Juan. He's always in his best humor after hunting, though even that's not saying very much." She shivered a little. "I heard him tell his huntsman not to take wine today, because he intended to stop at the Tavern Meseta after the chase. Perhaps, if you hurry, you can find him there."

"I'll find him and speak to him. Even if he doesn't approve our marriage, he can't forbid my seeing you at your home. By God, the Moncadas aren't rich, but all Spain knows the name! I've been offered a troop in the army in Italy where there's a fine war making. By the end of it, I'll have glory and ransoms enough to make your father glad to have me for a son. But for today . . . Wish me good luck, Alisa."

"I'll pray to the Virgin for your success, Juanito," she said tenderly. "Now, hurry."

Juan helped the duenna to the mule and Alisa to Midnight. Then he stood in the road and watched them ride away. Alisa turned as they crossed the bridge, and he snatched off his cap and bowed low. Then they were gone.

Juan threw his cap in the air and gave a shout of triumph. The palm of his right hand still felt warm. He looked at it, at the thin red scar where he had grasped the blade of a Moorish sword in a hot fight and at the small scars and calluses worn by sword and lance. He thought of where that palm had just lain, of the body that scar had touched, and he kissed it lightly. He retrieved his cloak, mounted his horse and rode with joyous speed over the Spanish hills.

He spurred Conqueror into his fastest gallop. The wind whipped his face, and held his long cloak like a fluttering banner behind him. He left the road and climbed through

thickets of live oak and chestnut. Guadarrama squirrels scampered in every direction in the woods. Far off, one of the big green woodpeckers tapped an unheard answer to the drum of Conqueror's hoof. A lynx dodged. Juan climbed down the ridge and took the high road to Seville.

Ten minutes later he pulled Conqueror to a halt outside the Tavern Meseta. In the stableyard he saw the grooms walking some hunters still hot from the chase. Good. He was in time. He threw his reins to a stable boy.

He hesitated a moment before he went in, picking the words he would use, the tone in which he must speak. Francisco de Montejo was a great lord and a cold, ambitious man. He would hardly welcome an alliance with a military family, in spite of its fame. He needed gold for his ambitious plans. Hell and devils, the worst he could say was no.

As the door swung shut behind him, Juan found himself in a large, crowded common room, its darkness somewhat lightened by a fire and candles. Tambourines shook and castanets clicked as a girl danced for a rough company of men who were hypnotized by her lithe movements. To the left of the door a small room had been partitioned off the common room by rough boards and a greasy curtain. This was the nearest approach to a private dining-room the Tavern Meseta afforded. It was well lighted by several candles and by the daylight through one of the two windows of the house. It was occupied by two men.

Francisco de Montejo was easily recognized in the candlelight. The hardness of his mouth and eyes had relaxed, as if his thoughts were pleasant.

It was a good moment, Juan thought, to enter. He reached the curtain which served as a door, and stopped. At Montejo's right sat another man, a brilliant figure in scarlet and black. He saw Juan at the door and frowned.

It was Urbino! While Juan had courted Alisa, Urbino had courted her father. Superior strategy. It was too late for Juan to withdraw, so he bowed deeply, mindful of the rank of the two men.

"A good day and the Saints' blessings on you, Don Francisco," he said. "And to you, Don Diego." He bowed a second time. Montejo looked up and nodded.

"My thanks, Señor de Moncada, and their blessings on you."

Urbino was silent, but he looked at Juan with cold dislike. Montejo drank again without a further word to Juan, who bowed again and left the room.

It was misfortune multiplied to find Urbino with Alisa's father. Urbino's discourtesy rankled. Juan knew that his father and Urbino were unfriendly, but they had always been civil. The red-lipped crow, of course, disliked Juan's attention to Alisa. Suppose he could know what had happened in the last hour! That would curdle his wine. Juan smiled and walked briskly into the common room of the inn.

The landlord, obsequious and talkative, praised his cellar and his inn as he showed Juan to a table close to the dancing girl. He could smell gold as well as any man in Spain. At a word from Juan he brought him a dusty bottle of wine and a glass. Juan found the wine good and turned his attention to the dancer.

He heard the bustle caused by the departure of the Montejo and Urbino retainers, who had been drinking wine at a nearby table, but he disdained to look up. There'd be no chance to address Don Francisco while Urbino was around. Besides, the dancing girl's performance was growing interesting, even to a young man who so short a while before had left his sweetheart. Her circular skirt swirled high, showing her white, slim thighs. Ah! There was no harm in looking.

Urbino stayed after Montejo had gone and drew one of his men into the private room.

"I have a task for you, Pedro. There'll be gold if you perform it well."

"At your excellency's command." Pedro's black eyes shone at the mention of gold. Urbino had counted on his greed.

"You saw the Moncada whelp?"

Pedro nodded respectfully.

"You must also know one or more of those dogs in the inn. No such number of rascals could be gathered together in Spain without your having a friend among them."

"Aye. Two I know. One of them I have used in some small matters."

"Good. Moncada annoys me. I want him finished. Here is gold. See to it."

"But your excellency, your honor . . . killing! And in broad daylight? It can't be done. Your honor knows that I am his devoted servant, but . . ."

"Softly, man. Use your wits. The men in that room are half drunk. Finish the job and pay your friends to incite them against Moncada. Say he's a heretic, a Moor, a spy—anything. The three of you can stir them up. Propose that they throw him out of the inn. They'll follow your lead then

because dogs like them always welcome a one-sided fight. In the confusion one of your men can use a dagger. Mind you don't fail, and remember what I know of your past!"

"Your honor's servant," murmured the man. "I will do my best."

"Don Diego," called Montejo. "Are you ready?"

Urbino left the inn. Shortly afterwards, he and Montejo were cantering down the highroad, followed at a respectful distance by their servingmen, grooms and men-at-arms, who barely commented on the fact that Pedro was missing. Urbino was pleased with himself. Of course this trap might fail but a wise man lost no opportunity. He had already set some other traps that would bag his game for him, but this would be quieter and less trouble, though not so enjoyable. He'd seen Alisa's face when she looked at Juan de Moncada, and he knew that in Moncada he had a serious rival. He had resolved to make Alisa his wife. The motto of the house of Urbino was "Spare None," and Don Diego had made it his own before now.

Juan wasn't aware that one of Urbino's men had come back into the inn, or that he held a whispered conference with two rough characters. But the landlord was gratified at the sudden increase in business, so marked an increase that he had to call in a serving girl to help serve wine. Juan was still intent on the young dancer. With a last wild flourish she ended her dance, bowed and ran from the room. The landlord met her at the door.

"Hell, wench, why didn't you make a play for the young cavalier? Have you gold enough? Bones of Judas! I haven't."

"Mind your business," she snapped at him. "I know mine. He hasn't had enough wine yet. Wait, let him drink. Then I'll do my special dance for him. You'll see."

She whirled away, leaving the landlord rubbing his hands and smiling. A clever girl. And he would be sure to have a good place from which to watch that dance.

Juan drank his wine and played with his memories. "To Alisa," he said as he lifted his glass. Damned good wine. He noticed that the men were growing noisier. As he looked around to discover why, he realized that a good many pairs of eyes were on him. Once or twice even a thumb was jerked in his direction. He thought nothing of it. Since his return from Italy, he'd become used to being pointed out. Probably some old soldier in the inn had recognized him and was passing the word on to the others. Juan forgot them at once; he shook with excitement about Alisa. By God, but her skin was

smooth! And her breasts! He closed his hand and signaled for more wine.

Men at the next table were discussing the Indies. Men seemed infected by the idea of the New World as if by a fever, thought Juan. Everywhere men talked of it they sounded as though they were telling improbable dreams of islands, gold, strange animals and strange men. It was not for him, this paradise. Europe was his world, and in Europe, Spain, where Alisa was. There was excitement in the air. Change was inevitable, and there was no reason why Juan could not rise to the top right where he was. A major's rank in Italy was the next step; he'd see that it was soon followed by a higher one.

The host arrived with another bottle for Juan, and the click of castanets and the tinkle of tambourine signaled the return of the dancer. She moved slowly into the cleared space, swinging her hips. She walked close to Juan, smiled at him, and then swiftly whirled into her dance. Men grumbled at the attention she paid the spy or heretic or whatever the dog was. Juan heard someone mutter, "Morisco!" but he paid no attention. By God! The wench was good. It was no disloyalty to Alisa to watch her. He was a lover, to be sure, but not a monk.

The music worked up to a frenzy of sound and rhythm and the dancer with it to a finale, a crescendo in which she spun so rapidly that her loose dress rose until it was a horizontal blur at her shoulders. For a full moment she whirled, her naked body gleaming. Her audience licked its lips. Mouths gaped and eyes burned. The music stopped, the dancer became a statue, and the dress settled like folding wings around her. There was a second's silence and then came a thunder of applause.

"Marvelous!" shouted Juan, feeling the wine and still seeing that white body. "Bravo, girl."

As she walked to him she swayed. Her eyes were shining, and she smiled. Juan started to get up, but she slid onto his lap and leaned her warm musky body against him.

"You liked my dance, Señor?"

"The devil! Yes!" said Juan, not quite ready for this much intimacy and certainly not for the intimacy he knew the girl had planned for later. "Your dance is a thing of art, Señorita. You must have wine. Host! Another glass."

Men growled like dogs when a strange dog makes off with a juicy bone. But one of Pedro's friends saw that this was the time to start trouble. He leaped to his feet and deliber-

ately let his chair fall backward to get the attention of the room.

"By the bowels of Judas!" he shouted. "Are we men to see a lousy coxcomb take our girl away from us like this? Down with the heretic! Throw him out. Out with him, I say!"

His confederate added his anger from across the room, and Pedro approved both in well-timed shouts. The crowd yelled its agreement and men staggered to their feet toward Juan. Drunk with wine and aroused by the dance, they were ready to follow any leader.

Juan was surprised and shocked. He shifted the girl from his lap and whirled to face the men. He saw danger, drew his sword and dagger, moved his table and stepped between it and the shoulder of the fireplace, so that he was then protected on three sides.

"Señorita, I suggest you retire," he said in a perfectly calm voice.

The advancing men slowed down before his businesslike preparations.

"Such devilish luck," the girl swore to herself. "There goes my gold. Damn Quevedo! Why couldn't he have waited? And what's got into him anyway? I'm not his girl."

"Ea, lads," said Juan easily and quietly. "If you want sport, come on. I'll do my best to entertain you, and I promise that you won't all walk away when it's over. On the other hand, there's no harm done. I have no mind to take the girl, though you're mighty touchy on that point. Come. There's no lack of true enemies either here or in that new world of which many of you have been talking. There's no need for good Spaniards to make crow's meat of one another. What say, lads? Steel in the belly, or wine? Wine's the more comfortable, I can tell you."

It held them a moment until a man shouted:

"Heretic! Spy! We don't mind good Spaniards having the wench, but we don't want to love your leavings, or drink with you. Ho, lads, throw him out! Out with him!"

They roared a response and moved forward again, knives out. The scale tipped toward violence and the girl, seeing the decision, started to move away.

At that instant there was a sudden drum of hoofs rapidly nearing. A horse was pulled to a halt outside the door. Again the men stopped dead still, and turned to see who would enter. This was the way the law came at times, and there were several men in this company who feared the law.

The door opened and a man stepped to the sill. The can-

dles lit up his face and clothing. He stood solidly in the door, a big, broad-shouldered man with bright red hair. His eyes were deep set, his cheekbones high and a scar ran from the right eyebrow down to the chin, white against dark tan. His big nose was bent and crooked, but he gave an impression of strength and will severely tried by a hard life.

"The devil!" said Juan. "Valera." My God! I thought he was still at sea. I should have known. Always when I need him most, there he is! "Ea, Flat Nose! Over here."

Valera winced at the "El Chato." He hated the nickname.

"Ho, young master," he bellowed. "There you are with wine and a wench. I was certain you'd be spending your time properly and to advantage. Good."

He made his way through the crowd with a good-natured roughness that left men not resenting being shoved aside. Valera saw the danger to Juan, which meant that he himself shared in that danger. So be it.

At the table he picked up the bottle of wine and poured the remnants down his throat. Then, nonchalantly, he hurled the bottle into the air, took the glasses and flipped them after the bottle. A stir ran through the room as he kept the bottle and glasses spinning up and down, each caught and thrown again in its turn. Some of the men had seen jugglers before but, even to them, it was an unexpected thing, and they laughed with astonishment and pleasure and half the danger was gone. Valera went to another table, poured wine into a glass, bit a half circle from the brim and chewed and swallowed it with loud relish, washing the fragments down with wine. Men shouted their appreciation and turned to one another to express their pleasure.

"I tell you, friends," said Valera loudly. "It's better to drink wine than eat glass, or even sharp steel. Come. Let's have a drink. Host! Brandy for a thirsty man, in God's name."

The landlord was grateful for a chance to intervene.

"Here, your honor, here. The finest brandy in Spain, as hot and burning as the eyes of our dancer. On the house, your honor, and may it bring tears of pleasure to your eyes."

"Good." Valera lifted the bottle and took a great swallow. He shuddered and blew his breath in a loud "Hah!" of satisfaction.

"Like fire itself, friends, like fire itself. See, I'll show you how it feels. Thus."

He drank again, tilting his head way back. He held the

liquor in his mouth, put a lighted candle to his lips and blew burning brandy in a haze of blue fire a foot above his head!

The mob, now only a crowd of laughing men, sat down again and called for wine—a few even for brandy—and a few moments later the tavern was a normally noisy place.

Juan smiled, shaking his head. The girl came back, her visions of gold renewed. Valera walked to her, his eyes dancing in the candlelight.

"Hah! A likely wench. What's your name, my little dove?"

"I'm not a dove, Flat Nose, certainly not your dove."

"No? Good. I don't like doves. Ho, Juan, this appears to be an excellent chance to invoke good fortune."

He swung the startled girl around and thoroughly patted her bottom. She whirled and slapped his arms.

"Dirty yokel! Keep your filthy hands off my . . . off me, or I'll show you the knife in my garter!"

"Easy, girl," said Juan. "It's only a way he has of bringing good luck. He's done that to half the girls in Spain and Italy, eh, Valera?"

"That's right, Juan. It's a good way to insure luck and much more pleasant than spitting through horseshoes. I could tell you . . ."

"Instead, tell me this: what in the name of all the saints are you doing here? I didn't even know you'd reached Cadiz. Have you been to Marchena?"

"And have I not?" said Valera, gulping half a glass of wine. "I left Utrera before daybreak, rode hard and arrived at the Casa Moncada an hour ago. I met Father Villegas coming from the door, with your father behind him shouting, 'Where is Juan? Isabel, where is your son?' I gathered he was anxious to see you and after he had embraced me, opened a flask of his best vintage and helped me drink it, he sent me off for you. Your noble mother told me you were tricked out in silks and velvets like some dandiprat of a courtier, so I knew of course that you were out chasing a skirt. Likewise I knew that by this time the girl would have gotten rid of you. I knew also that whatever luck you'd had, you'd be wanting a drink. I remembered your old liking for this spot and came here. Behold. Conqueror was in the stable yard, and you were in here. But I'm afraid we must go at once. I'll tell you about the troop while we're on the road. Your father wants you urgently. Something important."

Juan got up at once, threw silver to the table and took leave of the disappointed dancer. A moment later the door closed behind him and Valera.

Urbino's man, Pedro, pounded his fist on the table and swore bitterly to himself. He'd almost had Urbino's gold in his pocket. Then that cursed Flat Nose had come. He'd known the throw was lost when he saw Valera; he'd had experience of him before. Valera had been a sailor once, sailing even to the Indies, it was said. His ship had been captured in the Mediterranean by the corsairs, and he'd served as a galley slave before being bought by a traveling Moorish magician. It was from him he'd learned those damned tricks that had saved Moncada today. It was said that Don Miguel de Moncada treated Valera as a brother rather than a man-at-arms. There wasn't a man in Seville who could stand against him. Damn him. Damn the luck!

CHAPTER 3

Dark clouds hid the sun, low in the west, and rain was in the air when Juan and Valera arrived at Marchena. As they rode by the blacksmith shop, the smith greeted them.

"Hola, Master Juan and you, Valera. You're just in time. It'll be wet here soon. Those black clouds are fat—like a beer-filled wench hunting a clump of bushes. The devil! I'm glad I work under a roof."

"There's something in that, Manuel." Juan reined in his horse. "You'll stay dry, but there's always some compensation. The farmer will stop work and have a jug of beer."

Juan looked around the cluttered shop where he'd spent many hours with a hammer and metal until Manuel Lopez swore he knew more about metalwork than most smiths.

"In God's name, Juan, let's go or we'll have to swim."

In a few minutes they'd entered Don Miguel's modest holding, the white house covered with vines, a few acres of arable land and some pasture for the old knight's horses. The stableman took their horses in the courtyard. As they entered the door of the Casa Moncada the first drops of rain fell. They found Don Miguel de Moncada in a long, low-ceilinged room, a flask of wine before him on the table. Juan's mother sat near him, pale and obviously upset.

Juan greeted his parents with affectionate respect. Don Miguel was white-haired but he carried his body erect and his eyes were young. Juan kissed his mother's hand.

"God be with you, my son."

Valera remained in the room at Don Miguel's word, standing respectfully. His face was solemn. Juan noticed once more how the heavy scar had drawn down the right corner of his lip. When Valera smiled, the left corner went up, giving him a very crooked smile, a pleasantly ironic smile. But Juan knew that when Valera smiled, he did so with his whole heart. Juan's father spoke with formality.

"My lady, my son and my friend, I have bad news for us all. It's better that you hear it from me than from an enemy. And it appears we have an enemy, a bitter and treacherous man."

He poured a little more wine into his glass, turned it in his fingers to enjoy its color. He hesitated. Juan grew worried. He'd never before seen his father hesitate this way. Finally, Don Miguel looked up. A muscle twitched in his cheek and the veins in his forehead stood out.

"Father Villegas, our man of God and good friend, has warned me that whispers are circulating in Seville and the church that we Moncadas are tainted with Moorish blood!"

Except that he was pale, there was no other change in him as he spoke. He was calm and dignified—a true knight of Spain was trained to meet disaster. Doña Isabel dropped her head in her hands and Juan barely restrained a horrified exclamation. Mixed blood was not merely a social stain in Spain: it exiled a man or woman socially. It ruined his chances for any sort of decent life. A Morisco was an outcast and his property could be confiscated without appeal. He could hold no office or title of honor. Furthermore, no member of any pure-blooded Spanish family would even contemplate marriage with such a person. Their children would be forever accursed.

Alisa, oh Alisa! thought Juan.

"It is said that my grandfather, Don Luis, had a Moorish mother and was a secret enemy of Spain and the church." Don Miguel was in absolute control of himself, but the muscle twitched more than ever and his breathing was slightly irregular. Valera muttered a curse. Juan felt cold; tension was forcing him toward a question. But his father spoke again, head high and in a ringing voice.

"This accusation is a lie, a vile lie! I am told that Don Diego is spreading it. A danger confronts us, but we have the shield of truth. My son, you and I must find a way to kill this lie at its source. The saints are surely with us and the blessed Virgin will help us. But we must do our part."

He comforted his wife.

"Now, now, Isabel, don't cry. We'll weather this evil as we have others. Go to your room and lie down. Your prayers will be better than tears."

"Not for myself," she sobbed. "I weep for you, my husband, and for my son, just starting life."

"I know, Isabel. Now leave us. I wish to speak to Juan alone."

She left the room, still crying, followed by Valera who needed to curse out loud. Juan took the glass of wine his father poured with steady hands. They drank.

"Sir," said Juan. "Do you know why Urbino should act in this way against us? There must be some reason for it, some hatred. Why else would he lie?"

He knew the reason behind Urbino's actions, but he asked in the hope that he might not have to say it.

"Yes, son. Father Villegas has given me the reason. He says that Urbino wants Alisa de Montejo for his wife. He believes that Urbino is disturbed by Doña Alisa's affection for you, and he takes this way of eliminating you. Can that be correct, Juan?"

"Yes," said Juan, meeting his father's eye. "It is true. Only today Alisa promised to be my wife."

"Splendor of God! But you warm my heart with that news, my son. That will set Don Diego back on his heels. My congratulations, Juan. I have never met, but once, a young woman as sweet and fair as your Alisa. Only Isabel could have been her equal. Come, Juan, fill your glass. We must drink to the future Lady Moncada!"

They stood and drank. Juan was deeply touched by the wholeheartedness of his father's joy. He faltered, not knowing how to say what he had to say.

"Sir, I almost regret my good fortune because of the danger it brings upon you and my mother. Sir, sir, should I renounce Alisa? I'd do more than that, I'd give my life to spare . . ."

"Renounce! Renounce? What talk is this? Renounce your lady because a dunghill cock would lie to get her? *Are you my son?* Are you? Or are you afraid? If you *are* my son, speak no more of renouncing Alisa!"

Don Miguel had overturned the bottle in his agitation and was heedless of the flowing wine. Juan reached across and righted it, smiling at his father's indignation and made glad by his unselfishness and courage. Don Miguel read his answer in Juan's smile. His eyes softened.

"I know, my son, I know. You think of your mother and me. But know this: I would far rather die, I would even rather your mother die than that a Moncada should give up the woman he loved for fear of a dog like Urbino, or for fear of anyone or anything! Your mother cries only for you —perhaps a bit for me—for she knows how proof I am against any evils in life. I have lived a long time in honor and great happiness. Go, now, and let me hear no more renunciation. I shall attend to Urbino."

"No, father. It is for me."

Don Miguel smiled at Juan.

"As you will, my boy, but it will be difficult. He is a 'Soldier of Christ,' a familiar of the Inquisition. We must make sure that he gives the provocation, so that it is clear that you must fight him to keep your honor. Go carefully, my son. We must finish him without bringing his fearful crew upon us."

A coldness settled over the room at the mention of the Inquisition. Don Miguel went on, half to himself.

"It's an evil thing. How could a man . . . Juan, go see that there is no one outside that door. What I want to say could get the two of us clapped into jail. No one there? Good. As I said, how could a man do it? Torture the helpless, murder children, tear women on the rack and burn them alive! That it's done in the name of a merciful Christ makes it the blackest sin, the most devilish thing in Christendom!"

Passion made him raise his voice, he realized, so he checked himself and went on in a lower tone.

"I spoke of this to Father Villegas. He, though a priest, hates the Inquisition as much as I do. You must remember that in speaking of it to me as he did, he puts his own fate in our hands. Never mention it. He told me a good deal about the Inquisition, which I pass on to you because it helped me keep my faith in and my love for our holy church.

"The Inquisition is not really a part of the church. Our holy father, the Pope, is against the actions of the organization as it exists in Spain. Originally it was set up to keep the church strong, to find out her enemies and remove them from positions where they could corrupt others. The Mother Church must be kept undefiled and unchanged in all countries. The Inquisition was designed to save, not to condemn and torture.

"But in Spain—alas for our country—men have seized

on it and perverted it to their own base desires. They use its awful strength for personal aggrandizement and power. Some are sincere fanatics, bigots who have stared so long at the sun that they've blinded themselves to truth. But most of them are only evil men. The devil's hand is in it, for now these men appear to speak for the holy church itself, and no one dares protest, though many people hate their every action. They have such power in this country that even the Pope dares not take steps he would like to take. If he did, these evil men might tear all Spain and her church away from Rome. He does what he can, and some day, with the help of God and the saints, relief and justice will come.

"There, my son, is a dragon for a true knight to battle! Never has man since the Saviour slain so great a one. But softly. Such words, if known, could mean our downfall. Go now, son. Step carefully and all will yet be well."

Juan found Valera sitting under the patio porch staring at the thick veil of rain. He glanced up at Juan.

"When do we slit his throat?" he asked.

"Slowly, Flat Nose," said Juan affectionately. "There'll be no 'we.' I'll find a way to make him challenge me, and I'll kill him. It's the only thing to do."

"Challenge? Pah, Juan, you'll never get him to fight. If you attack him, you put your parents' necks under his foot. The only way—and a thing I shall do, with the help of the saints—is to slip half a foot of steel under his hide some dark night!"

Valera's red hair stood on end and his big hands clenched and unclenched. Juan had never heard him sound so deadly, so purposeful. El Chato fought smiling and was a generous conqueror. But knives in the dark! That wasn't Valera.

"But, Valera, he's always surrounded by guards. You'd be caught. The Inquisition would burn you alive for attacking its damned servant."

"So be it. I'd be content."

Juan put his hand on his friend's arm.

"Old comrade, why are you willing to do so much for us? Why should you be willing to die for us?"

"Has your father never told you how we met?"

"No."

"Then I'll tell you, so you'll ask no more foolish questions."

He was silent for a moment and when he spoke, it was in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I was married once, Juan, to a beautiful wife, and we

loved each other. It was after I was freed from the Moors. The silly tricks of magic I'd learned with the Moorish magician made life easy for me. I traveled all over Spain and France with a troop of jongleurs, amusing the people, amusing lords and ladies, even kings. I saved my money. I fell in love and was married. I had a house in Cadiz where my wife lived while I traveled. Soon we had the most loved little girl any man ever had. Ea, she was sweet! The way she'd smile and laugh when I came in the door, and reach her little fists for me! Well, no matter. I was in Cordoba when the plague struck Cadiz. I hurried home. When I reached there, I found the sign of the plague on my door. None would go near it. The neighbors tried to keep me from entering, but I pushed them away. There was a horse outside the door. I went into my house, Juan, as I'd gone in so many times before.

"I found my wife dead and disfigured by the disease. My daughter was dying. No neighbor or friend had dared enter to help and comfort them, but my daughter wasn't dying alone and abandoned. She was lying in your father's arms. He was stroking her forehead with a wet cloth. He looked at me when I came in. It was a kind and pitying look, Juan, and as calm as if he were sitting in a garden. He gave her to me without saying a word. She knew me, and she died with a smile on her face. When your father rode away from Cadiz, I rode with him. I've never willingly left him since, and I never shall.

"I would die for him as quickly as I would drink wine, and as gladly. Let that bastard Urbino look to himself!"

CHAPTER 4

All night it rained. Rain splashed from gutters and eaves, and the air grew cold. Even the fire burned indifferently, and Juan went to his room early. He stood for a long time looking out his window.

His broken sleep and nightmarish dreams put him in no mood to wake up to another dark day of rain.

"Damn the luck!" Juan said to himself. "Alisa will never meet me today. But to curse the weather is like trying to drown a fish in the river. I'll visit her at home, and perhaps Doña Luisa will turn her back for a moment."

He found Don Miguel as usual, and his mother, her calm and pleasant self. But he saw the marks of tears and sleeplessness in her eyes. Valera, too, had discarded his iron gloom of the night before and showed a jovial face to the world. Time passed slowly as Juan waited for the hour to leave and prayed for the sunshine which did not come. He left the house quietly, wrapping his finery under a long cloak against the rain.

Juan made his way to the Casa Montejo in Seville. He found Alisa at home and had his hoped-for minute alone with her. They arranged another meeting after late Mass on Saint Jonas' day and Juan left, humming a gay song, her quick kiss still warm on his lips.

This was a spell of gray days with rain. Farmers smiled at the thought of the crops the rain would grow, and old men searched back through their memories for such rain in February. Father Villegas left for Toledo to attend a conference of priests, and Valera was sent by Don Miguel to Cordoba.

St. Jonas' day dawned cloudy and dark. Juan bit his nails as he looked out his window into the wind-swept day and the gray sky. But at least it wasn't raining, and the Moncadas made a gay cavalcade as they set out to attend late Mass at the cathedral in Seville. Don Miguel preferred the quiet church of Father Villegas, but in the absence of his friend he had to be content with a grander service. They were accompanied by Baltasar, the groom, to tend the horses in the plaza outside the cathedral.

There were none of the gay greetings of other days from the people they met, and Don Miguel wondered how much of the change was caused by the wet weather and how much by the slander of Urbino. He shifted in the saddle to see a knot of people who had turned to look after them with strange excited looks. He began to feel uneasy. If it would not have seemed to smack of retreat, he would have suggested that they return home. As they rode across the plaza of the cathedral with the Santa Casa looming on their right, his uneasiness increased. Why had the people remained standing idly about the plaza after early Mass? And in such unpleasant weather at that?

They left the animals with Baltasar and walked to the cathedral door. There they almost stopped. Then Don Miguel led his family into the cathedral just as the great bells stopped ringing.

There was a vast silence except for their own slow steps, the breathing of the congregation and the sudden flapping

of pigeons' wings from outside the door. They had nearly reached their pew when Juan felt his father start. Don Miguel was staring at the altar. Juan heard his mother gasp, felt her stagger. But he forgot her for a moment as he saw a brilliant, long, yellow and red gown draped over a wooden effigy before the altar. There was a scarlet cross on the breast. Even at that distance Juan could read the name on a large square of parchment hung above the robe.

De Moncada.

A Sanbenito, a sign of shame with the name Moncada above it! Don Miguel went forward with Isabel and Juan at his side. Their faces were emotionless. Doña Isabel repressed a scream. She would not, she *would* not further disgrace her men. The three of them stood before the altar as the hum of the crowd grew almost to a roar. The placard said:

"The family of Luis Cordoba Manuel de Moncada. Convicted of having Moorish blood; heresy against God; slander and curses against the Holy Church. Sentenced to wear the Sanbenito for life. To be preserved hereafter for the shame of their blood and as a warning to all true Christian Spaniards."

Don Miguel and Juan turned to face the crowd, staring into the faces in the front rows. Juan saw well-known faces which had assumed the hard masks of strangers. Many faces were sneering, a few—even worse—pitying. He felt his mother sway, and he put his left arm around her waist.

"Courage, Mamacita," he whispered to her.

"Your arm, my lady," said his father, and the three Moncadas walked proudly, their faces expressionless, down the long, long aisle and out the door.

For a moment, the daylight blinded him, but he soon made out the sneers and hatred on the faces of those ready to receive them. He didn't know that he smiled a twisted smile or that the people in the front ranks of the mob saw two smiling men and two pairs of very hard blue eyes. Don Miguel spoke.

"I pray you, good people, open a way for us to pass."

His voice was quiet, yet it carried well back into the crowd and its authority reminded them that Don Miguel was one of the most dangerous men in Europe. All Seville knew of the exploits of his son in the recent wars in Italy and a path opened before the three Moncadas as they walked across the square, looking straight ahead, talking together as if they were going quietly home from Mass.

Doña Isabel preserved the proud calm on her face, but

she was filled with despair. The Sanbenito, a sign of eternal shame! People had been stoned to death in Spain for having to wear it. And it was a curse which descended even beyond the fourth generation. Ah, Mary! Help us now! Make it all a nightmare. Let me wake under the white ceiling of my room at home and see sunshine through the windows instead of this gray city and this ugly mob.

It was not a dream. They reached Baltasar and the horses. As Juan swung into his saddle a stone grazed his shoulder. The mob shouted. More stones flew; one struck Don Miguel's horse, and the animal reared and kicked. Juan and his father reined their horses around to face the crowd, drew their swords, and held their spurred boots poised for a stroke. They smiled, not at the mob but above it, as if they were seeing pleasant visions, and headed their horses, at a walk, toward the densest part of the crowd with Doña Isabel between them. A lane opened to let them by, and though hisses and oaths came from those farthest away, those nearby, whose clothing was brushed by the Moncada horses, were quite still. Juan and his parents crossed the plaza, threaded their way down a street and clattered across the familiar bridge toward home. As they entered Marchena, the village plaza in front of the church was deserted. People peered at them through shutters, or ran into the streets after they passed, to stare at them. As they crossed the square, Manuel Lopez, the blacksmith, walked to meet them and bowed deeply, hat in hand.

"A good day to you, my lady and honored sirs."

"And to you with God's blessing," replied Don Miguel, gratefully.

After they had gone, Lopez swept the village with a black look, spat noisily toward the church and stumped off to the tavern where he picked three fights during the day and drank a great deal of wine without getting satisfactorily drunk.

Alisa had promised to try to meet Juan after late Mass, so he returned to his horse after seeing his parents in the door. Perhaps . . . perhaps Alisa would be there! She'd keep her promise if she could, he knew. But how would she take this lie? She would know of it by now, of course. It was for her ears that the lie was made! The lie, the cowardly, fearful lie. A man's lie accepted by the church because that man was the church's trusted servant! Urbino, the "Soldier of Christ!" Juan patted his sword-hilt. By God! Urbino would not live long! Juan's bruised and angry spirit looked forward to the

warmth and comfort of being near Alisa, of her love. She'd never believe this foul accusation. She'd stand with him against all the world!

Juan pulled Conqueror to a stop as he saw a horse bearing Montejo's colors. Juan dismounted. Joy and relief filled him as he pushed his impatient way through the underbrush. Finally, he pushed aside a willow and stepped toward their secret place. He stopped, feeling himself grow cold.

A pale man, who wore the livery of Montejo, stood by the stone, the stone where Juan had spread his cloak for Alisa and across which he had bent her answering body for a long, lover's kiss!

"You," Juan said. "You, what are you doing here? Speak, damn you, speak!"

The man stammered, hesitated, tried again and spoke at last, holding his hand out to Juan as he did so.

"Señor de Moncada, I . . . I . . . only know that my lady Alisa told me to find you here at this hour and give you this. Here, take it, your lordship. Here, it is yours!"

Juan took the small square of paper. He, too, turned pale. He stared at the note, not caring that the groom slipped away. Its lavender perfume brought only memories of happiness. Slowly he opened it.

> To Juan Gonzales Cordoba de Moncada from Señorita Alisa de Montejo. Greetings. I have loved you, but the blood of a Montejo could never mix except with the purest blood of Spain. I feel that I have been wronged by you in not having been told of your Moorish blood and the disgrace of your ancestor, if the accusation is true. And how, oh how, my one-time sweetheart, could the holy church lie?
>
> I wish you good fortune. I may not, I will not, now say that I love you, but if this black thing is taken away by some miracle of the saints and God's mother, seek me again. Until that day, farewell and may you go with God.
>
> Alisa

Alisa believed the lie! Where was the loyalty of love? Juan's misery was the greater because of his faith in her.

Meanwhile, at the Casa Moncada, Doña Isabel dried her tears in the privacy of her room, felt oppressed and decided to go out into the village. She tried to show her husband a cheerful face as she went by. The world was against them, but she had good friends who wouldn't fail her.

Don Miguel sent her off with a kiss and with Baltasar for an escort. This wasn't Seville, this was their own village, a place of friends and of people who had always given them loyalty and respect. Don Miguel returned to the dining hall to pace back and forth. Every so often he would stop to caress the sword that lay across the table.

"By God, but this is hard! The villain, the lying villain. That the church would uphold him! I know if I say nothing until I get the help of old friends, the falseness of that damned placard will be shown up. But so help me God, it's hard to see my wife and son suffer! How can I keep my hand from that dog's neck? I've killed many men. Scores? Aye, scores and then more scores, but they were in battle. They do not weigh on me. And now, with one man to kill, to silence, to finish—the first I've ever truly wanted to kill —I must not! To act now would ruin us; the church would avenge her tool. Mary! Help me stay my hand, strengthen me to restrain my son."

He heard Isabel in the hallway when she returned. She was almost running. She passed the doorway, and he heard the door of her room close. He ran after her.

She was stretched on her bed, weeping, when he bent over her.

"What is it, my love? Come, together we can face this thing. Tell me what has happened."

All her married life Doña Isabel had known the comfort of resting her head on his broad shoulders, of bringing her troubles to him for understanding and ultimate solution. He had never failed her. She told him her bitter news now, stifling her sobs. The door of the house of Molina had closed as she approached. There was no answer when she knocked. She waited and knocked again. This time a voice came from the jalousied window above the door.

"Go away, Morisco! We want no heretical Moors here. We have our Limpieza. Where is *thy* certificate of pure blood, my *Lady* de Moncada?"

Señor Molina, whose voice she knew, had been her oldest and best friend. Isabel had hurried from the door as if pursued, hurried to the surest refuge she knew. Don Miguel listened with a face of iron. He took her tears on his shoulder, and soothed her as he would a child. At length she slept, exhausted by the anguish of the day. He arose and went to his room.

Don Miguel dressed himself in his best with great care, hanging the gold chain he had won in the battle of Ceri-

gnola around his neck and fastening the gold spurs of knighthood to his boots. The plume in his hat brushed the lintel as he stalked from the door. Sparks flashed from the flagstones as he wheeled his horse and plunged out of the courtyard.

The House of Don Diego Urbino lay on a square in a residential district of Seville. It was three stories high, a hollow square that showed a simple, narrow-windowed front to the world but was luxurious inside. In the patio, fountains splashed and flowers bloomed. Don Miguel trotted his horse across the quiet square toward it. The plaza was not quiet for long, however, as the Sunday crowds collected like crows around carrion behind him. Don Miguel's horse's shoes clattered on Urbino's door-stone. Don Miguel leaned from his saddle to let the great knocker—a bronze Neptune riding his chariot—fall heavily against the oaken door. A face appeared at the barred wicket only to disappear at once. Again and again the knocker banged against the door, and again and again only hollow echoes answered. Don Miguel turned his horse and rode away, ignoring the snickers and hisses. He lifted himself in his stirrups and shouted in a voice that carried like a bugle in church.

"Don Diego Urbino. Coward! Coward! I brand thee liar! I name thee coward! I call thee louse, hiding in the folds of a priest's hood! Coward! To hide behind oaken doors for fear of one old man? Come forth, Don Diego! Nay, not *Don* Diego—no title of honorable knighthood belongs before a coward's name. Urbino! Come forth!"

The crowd stirred as the iron voice went on. The crowd began to sympathize with Don Miguel and to feel contempt for Urbino. Then the mob roared. Tall, pale, dressed in black and red, Urbino walked out onto an iron-railed balcony above his door.

"Cease this yapping before my door, Morisco! It would dishonor any man of pure blood to fight a heretic in whose veins runs the blood of infidels. Remember, Morisco, you speak to a Soldier of Christ! Be off, or I will send my men out to drive you from Seville! By God! Away!"

Don Miguel flung aside his plumed hat. His face was purple with rage.

"Soldier of Christ! I spit on you, Soldier of Christ! It is through the church you have struck this foul blow at me and mine. Curse you! Curse the Mileze Christus! Curse the men of the church who allow you to prostitute a thing so good and so holy for the sake of a revenge you are too cowardly to take yourself!"

He wheeled his horse around and rode away, leaving behind him a hushed, shocked silence.

That night a blood-red sun shone momentarily through the clouds before it was swallowed up in darkness.

CHAPTER 5

It was a dark night over Marchena with only a few stars showing between hurrying clouds. A cuckoo's unending chant could be heard far-off, a dog howled and up from Seville came the sound of bells tolling midnight. Barely heard, like crickets under a cold hearthstone, came the cry of the watch. Dread hovered over the Casa Moncada as darkness hovered over the earth.

Cicadas close by were silenced by the sound of metal jingling. There were footsteps and then a heavy knocking at the door. Isabel and Miguel awoke with a start. Maria, the cook, shivered in her bed. Baltasar fumbled for a gown and candle. Juan found comfort in the pommel of his sword.

The knocking sounded again, loud and impatient. A guttering candle threw crazy shadows of familiar objects across the hallway as Baltasar hurried to the door. The Moncadas were close behind him.

"Who knocks at this hour? What do you want?"

"Open for God and His holy church!" came the answer.

"Open," said Don Miguel. "Never have I hidden from God or man."

The ironbound oak door creaked open and a dozen dark-clad men rushed in with a torrent of cold, night air. Juan and his father stepped between Doña Isabel and the intruders.

"Miguel Fernando Cordoba de Moncada. Juan Gonzales Cordoba de Moncada. Isabel Maria de Moncada y Cetina. I arrest you in the name of the church and the holy office of the Inquisition."

There were gasps as suddenly two swords gleamed in the torchlight and the dozen brutal men, in suits of leather, fanned out into a semi-circle. Half of them lifted crossbows to shoulder.

"Surrender to the mercy of the holy church or the three of you die."

There was a moment of silence, then the sword of Don Miguel clattered to the floor.

"God's will," he said.

"Dress."

Ten minutes later a single candle showed an empty hallway where two swords lay on the floor. As the sound of horses died in the distance, the cicadas began again.

The plaza of Seville was black and silent with the cathedral spires showing against a few stars. A cold wind was blowing. A door in one side of the shapeless mass of the Santa Casa opened like toothless jaws gaping for meat. The cold wind seemed to be created in the Santa Casa. As the door clanged behind them, the echo of a distant scream of agony sounded from below. This was the sacred place evil or bigoted men dedicated to the name of God. And that shapeless mass that loomed above it: were those two points of light stars or were they two blazing eyes; were those dim feet on its rooftree pierced with nails or were they cloven?

Juan felt the cold irons on his wrists. His feet, accustomed to the long strides of manhood, were shackled with chains. His parents were taken away, and he shuffled through dark corridors and narrow stairways leading downward past iron doors with small barred wickets in their faces. A door opened. He was pushed through and the door shut. A lock groaned and then absolute darkness mingled with absolute silence. Only the memory of the sonorous phrase of the black-robed priest remained: "Murus secretas strictus vel strictissimus." Juan seemed to hear the sound of his own thoughts which were numbing his brain with horror and fear. Never, Juan now knew, had he felt real fear before.

Many hours passed in this blackness and silence. There was no dawn, no moon, no dusk to mark their going. Only night. At intervals the gleam of a torch through the wicket was the signal that bread and water had been put under the door. Juan felt suspense, fever and fear until he was close to panic and hysteria.

Light flickered again through the wicket. This time the door opened. Torchlight blinded Juan until he blinked like an owl at the two black-cowled figures who held the torches.

"Juan Moncada, come to judgment," one of the figures said in an expressionless voice.

With an effort Juan smiled, squared his slumped shoulders and walked erect from the cell. He moved down long corridors without a word from his escort. Juan had only one object: to be a man.

They stopped before a door. Eyes gleamed through the wicket and the door opened. Juan went into a large brightly lighted cell. Don Miguel stood across the room in chains. His head was high. He was unshaven but there was a smile on his lips. When he saw Juan, the smile grew warm.

"Juan, my son! How goes it with you, boy?"

"Very well, father. I've a most comfortable suite, except that it's visited by cockroaches, hooded cockroaches, too—the worst kind."

"Good, son, good. I'm proud of you!"

"Silence," said a cold voice.

Juan's eyes took in the room as he went to his father's side. Three chairs stood on a platform at one end. In the center chair sat the Inquisitor of Seville, clothed in the white of innocence and purity. On his right was an assistant in black and white, and on his left was Urbino in black. A smile twitched Urbino's little black beard as Juan stared at him. Juan could hardly believe that the hatred he put into his stare could fail to kill.

A furnace lighted the room while iron instruments were heated in its flame. Torches added more light and Juan could see engines and apparatus of iron and cord and wood. Papers lay on a table before the judges and a secretary sat at another with his pen ready. A group of masked men in black stood near the instruments of torture.

Worst of all was a white-covered table in one corner of the room on which were laid out salves, ointments, dressings and surgical instruments. There were splints for bones soon to be broken, salves for burns soon to be smoking.

Over the judges' chairs hung a crucifix from which the image of the gentlest, kindest being the world had ever known watched with sorrowful eyes this new crucifixion of man by man, done in His name.

Two guards half carried in Doña Isabel. Her eyes came alive at the sight of her son and husband. She started to speak but the Inquisitor snarled.

"Silence, you white-garbed pile of mule dung! Watch your tongue!" Don Miguel said sharply.

The torture chamber echoed with the words. Even the executioners gasped. Never had Juan been so proud of his father as at that moment. The Inquisitor smiled.

"Note that remark, scribe. It alone is enough to convict."

The Moncadas were ranged side by side and the Inquisitor read their offenses to them. Threats against a familiar of the Inquisition. Disrespect. Suspicion of heresy. And, worst

of all, the words of Don Miguel in the plaza before Urbino's house. To be so hardened and evil Don Miguel must have had the support of his wife and son, therefore they, too, were accused of the same crime. What did they say? Did they confess and repent their heresy? Mother Church would be kind and loving, as always.

Don Miguel laughed. Juan summoned his courage.

"If the desire and intent to strangle that dog at your left is heresy, then I admit it. Otherwise, I have fought for the Faith. I am not a heretic."

Doña Isabel proclaimed the innocence of her husband and son, not speaking of her own. Urbino smiled and said:

"Why waste time, holy Father? I advise that you proceed with the old man. The rack and hot iron will silence his laugh soon enough."

"No, my son," answered the Inquisitor. "Mother Church desires no broken bodies except as a last resort. I think we shall take the woman first. That, too, will silence laughs. Executioner. The tablillas!"

The room swirled before Juan as he heard his father's broken cry and his mother's moan. He was unaware of his own shout of rage and horror. His father's curses filled the room.

"Dogs! Cowards! Devils! Take me, not a woman! Take even my son!"

It was useless. There was the heavy breathing of men, the shuffle of feet, the clank of iron and the whining rip of cloth as Isabel's blouse was torn from her shoulder baring her right arm and hand. They commenced the territo, the showing of the torture instruments to the victim. There was the boot of iron into which the foot was put to be crushed by the slow driving of wedges between the leg and the boot. There was the thumbscrew, a vise of the devil in which the thumb was jellied, turn by turn of the screw. Isabel's body went limp between her torturers. Don Miguel raged and cursed, tearing at his irons, dragging two guards with him as he strove to reach the judges. Three men held Juan fast.

The instruments were in place. Doña Isabel was seated, her face dead white, lips clenched. One burly man held a hand to the screw of the vise; another inserted a wedge in the boot and poised a short, heavy hammer. Don Miguel dropped to his knees.

"God, if You exist, as I have never before doubted that You exist, strike dead these devils who profane Your Name!"

The figure on the cross looked on with never-ending compassion.

"Commence," said the Inquisitor.

"I confess," said Don Miguel, simply.

"I also confess," said Juan, not knowing his voice. "Do what you will with me. Spare my mother!" Urbino looked disappointed and the other two judges smiled. The secretary took up his pen.

Afterwards they were led back to their cells to await sentence at an auto-da-fé. Juan well knew that the stake might await them. He thought of galley slaves he had seen at sea. He and his father might be chained to one of those oars! Time passed until Juan was sure that the long beard on his chin must be white.

It was St. Adrian's day, too late for early Mass, too early for late Mass, but the bells of Seville were ringing, echoing from wall and tower. The pigeons whirled and circled in ever renewed fright. The March sun was warm on the great crowd in the cathedral square. Interest centered on a large, black-curtained stage built in front of the cathedral. Between the pressing crowd and the stage, a whipping post was set in the ground, white and clean.

The bells stopped and men breathed like the wind in bare winter branches as silence dropped over the city and the square.

A trumpet split the silence in a chilling, spirited challenge which ended in a long, almost human cry, and the black curtains rolled back. The Inquisitor of Seville was a white statue at the front of the stage in dramatic contrast to the black figures behind him. A man dressed to represent St. Gabriel put a long trumpet to his lips and again blew the long call. Terror spread through the crowd. The last trumpet! The day of judgment! Men crossed themselves and sank to their knees.

The door of the Santa Casa opened and a procession started across the square, a procession of limping, shuffling people in gray sackcloth, their limbs twisted by torture. Some were supported by fellow prisoners; others were carried on litters. All the faces were ashen, their hair and beards unkempt. They formed a procession of the damned for whom it was in fact judgment day. These were the penitents, the unfortunates tried and examined by the Inquisition. Some were to be absolved; some were to be relaxed to the secular arm, but all were to be sentenced. All victims of the Inquisition were found guilty; those refusing to break

and confess under torture were burned alive. The penitents were ranged in two long rows before the platform, between the row of soldiers fringing the crowd and the stage. The trumpet blew.

The Inquisitor preached, inspired by a fiery fervor, with absolute conviction. He told them of the hell awaiting the unrepentant and of the loving kindness of the church toward erring children. He explained that they had been tortured on earth to save them from eternal torture hereafter. Any man listening might have the same experience and should be grateful for it if he did! Today, these sinners were to be washed clean of sin, to be received into the arms of Christ again.

The sermon ended with the trumpet call, and the Inquisitor read the sentence. Some had their property confiscated; others were to be imprisoned for periods of time ranging from months to life. Two former heretics had relapsed into sin and would be burned the next day. A sigh ran through the crowd at this. Still others were sentenced to the galleys, and many were to be whipped. Three had refused all the kindly attempts of Mother Church to persuade them to repent and were hereby relaxed to the secular arm, with the church's loving request for mercy to her erring children. The crowd licked its lips. It knew what that meant. Five would burn the next day. Many would wait through the night to have a good view of the proceedings. Juan heard the murmur behind him. His sick soul burned with hate for the man in white and the brutes behind him.

"Miguel Moncada." The sound of that name, though expected, cut through Juan like a sword. "To receive fifty lashes, to have all property confiscated, to wear the Sanbenito for life."

Juan reeled, yet he felt relief. Not the galleys, not the stake, but to be whipped!

"Juan Moncada. To receive fifty lashes, to have all property confiscated, to wear the Sanbenito for life."

"Isabel Moncada. To receive fifty lashes, to wear the Sanbenito for life. By the intercession of a father of the church, Isabel Moncada will be spared the lashes but shall suffer all other penalties described."

Even in his agony Juan felt a glow of gratitude to their friend and priest, Father Villegas. Only he would have dared so much with the Inquisition. Priest or not, he was a friend!

Guards walked among the penitents, turning them around so that they faced the whipping post and the hostile crowd.

The post was a six-foot wooden stake with a crosspiece to which was fastened metal cuffs that locked about the wrists. The first man to be whipped was brought to the front. His crimes were read to the audience, his gray robe ripped away, leaving him naked from the waist up. He was chained by the wrists to the crosspiece. The executioner drew his whip through his palm, stepped behind his victim's left shoulder, raised the lash, pivoted like a javelin thrower and cracked the leather across the bare back of the helpless, gray-haired man. It left a streak of red and the victim, already broken by torture, screamed and pled for mercy. The crowd liked it. It jeered at the man, guffawing at witticisms shouted to the front by some of the brighter spirits. The square, the shouting crowd, the falling whip and the sweating executioner blended for Juan into a blur. When the whipping ended, the moaning, barely conscious man slumped to the ground. He was hauled away, his back dressed and before the Sanbenito was on his shoulders, the plaza was echoing the screams of the next victim, a girl. The crowd pushed closer as her robe was torn off. It could see the mangled knee half-crushed by the boot. Otherwise, her young body was unmarked. Juan saw sweating, grinning men lick their thick lips as the girl screamed. She was secured to the post facing the crowd. When the executioner had finished, there was blood even on her breasts. The long list went on and on.

Finally Juan was awakened from a sick lethargy by the sound of a loved name.

"Isabel de Moncada."

He saw his mother led forth. He groaned and wrenched at the chains on his wrists. His father stood motionless beside him. The executioners tore Isabel's robe from her. Juan saw her standing half naked before these thousands of savage people, saw the breasts that had nourished him, the arms that had sheltered him, bared to the gaze of these beasts.

She was led aside. The crowd booed while the ugly red and yellow robe was put on. Don Miguel was next. The executioner did his worst—it was a labor of love for him—but Don Miguel made not one sound. Even his expression did not change, and when it was over, he pushed helping hands aside and walked unaided to the dressing station.

The whip was a burning torch drawn again and again across Juan's back. He could feel each blow through his whole body. A burning hate rose higher in him at each

stroke, though physical pain was almost a relief after the agony of watching the shame and torture of his mother and father. It was over. He, too, walked from the whipping post unaided. He felt the coolness of the ointments on a back that was permanently branded with the seal of the Inquisition—a pattern of criss-cross welts which whitened as the years passed but were always there.

The last victim had now been whipped. Those to be burned, those to be worked to death at the oar, and those sentenced to imprisonment were led away. The Inquisitor prayed again, pronounced the blessings of God on the reconciled sinners, and ended the auto-da-fé with an amen. Three men and two women awaited the stake the next day. The rest, those who had been punished, were free to go, free except for the waiting crowd, licking its lips.

"By God, Juan, but these devils shall pay for this day!" murmured Don Miguel as they met by Isabel's side.

Doña Isabel was unable to walk alone. Her eyes were dull, her face bluish and her breathing heavy and uneven. She wept at the misery in the eyes of her husband and son who supported her as together they moved toward the crowd. Catcalls, hisses and taunts met them as they made their way through. A large bearded man lurched to a halt before them.

"The devil, friends, here's a pretty set of scarecrows! Let's give them a little more to remember us by."

He stooped and was lifting a handful of mud in the air when a brawny arm slid under his chin. He was catapulted into the air and crashed to the ground on his back. He was lashed again and again across the face with a riding whip. A friend leaped to help him, but he, too, was knocked to the cobblestones. Juan knew it was Valera who had rescued them from the mob. Tears streamed down his cheeks. His eyes were blood-shot. He clasped Doña Isabel's hands in his.

"Oh, my lady, forgive me for not killing them all! I wanted to, but I knew that my death would not help you! Forgive me for not coming to your side!"

"You did rightly, old friend," Don Miguel told him. "To see the face of a friend now, Juan Valera, is of more comfort than any sword could have been."

Valera's victim had by now risen to his feet and started for them, cursing. El Chato drew a broadsword.

"Listen to me, you sons of bitches, you scum. The next louse to raise hand or voice to a Moncada is going to have

his head split!" he shouted. "By God, you'd best believe me. The proof will be damned final."

His face and the ferocity in his voice kept the pushing crowd at bay, but those in the back were prying cobblestones loose from the road while more and more people gathered at the sound of trouble, and the crowd began closing in. The danger was very real. The wearer of a Sanbenito was legal game for any mob and many had been killed before this.

Suddenly a calm voice rose above the noise of the crowd.

"Stop! Any man who harms these unfortunates I shall read from the church with bell, candle and book. Away with you. Go to your homes and repent your own sins!"

Father Villegas faced the Moncada family, his usually calm face marked by grief and fury. The crowd drew back and slowly dispersed.

"I know, my children, that you wish not to hear God's name. But I pray you remember it was man, not God, who did this thing to you. I have mules here and you must come with me. Your house has been taken from you, so you must stay with me until you are well and can make plans."

"Thank you, Father Villegas," said Don Miguel. "I know by whose intervention we have been spared worse torture. On behalf of Doña Isabel, I gratefully accept your offer.

"Father Villegas, you and the brethren of the church like you, I respect and love. But never will I enter a church while the Santa Casa stands, its walls sheltering hell's devils who call themselves men of God!"

Juan was going to the hills. He'd had all of men and cities he wanted for a long time to come. Villegas was obviously concerned but not surprised. Don Miguel looked at Juan with understanding, but Isabel seemed hardly to hear him. They mounted the mules. Valera swung to his horse after trying vainly to give him to Don Miguel. They rode across the river away from the mob, the cruelty and the ignorance of the city, to the white road under a blue sky where the only smells were sage and orange blossoms.

Juan said good-bye to his parents outside Marchena. His mother managed a smile and kissed him; his father kissed his cheeks and wished him God's blessing. Don Miguel understood Juan's need to take solace in the hills. Valera wrung Juan's hand and patted his shoulder gently.

"You'll find clothing and all you need in the hut. I knew you'd want to go there. I'll visit you soon, but now I'll stay with your father and my lady Isabel."

"You're a good friend, Juan Valera. You keep me from hating all men. The blessing of St. John be on you."

Juan was off. His back ached, but the bright day and the lonely road brought a kind of balm. As he rounded the trail over the edge of the rocky meseta he heard far behind him the slow tolling of a bell.

CHAPTER 6

As he helped Doña Isabel into the church, Father Villegas was alarmed at the pallor of her face and her difficult breathing. He was frightened when he saw her struggle for air and noticed her rolling eyes. He also saw the fear on Don Miguel's face as he entered the church.

Together they lay Doña Isabel on the cushions of the pew that bore the Moncada crest. All her strength left her and Don Miguel saw death's familiar face. He dropped to his knees at his wife's side, and held her hand. They had been lovers for so many years.

Father Villegas had left and now came hurrying to her again with the paraphernalia for extreme unction. In the midst of the last rites Isabel opened her eyes which were once again peaceful. Through that look Don Miguel knew again that he believed in God, a belief that had deserted him in the torture room.

"My love," he said, and he felt her arms, weak now where before they had been strong and demanding.

"Don't be bitter, my beloved," she murmured sleepily. "We'll meet again, I know. We've been battered, my knight, but not defeated. Bid my son farewell."

Soon after, the bell began to toll.

Don Miguel was tearless as he lay her head on the velvet cushion. He arose, looked at Father Villegas and dropped to his knees before the altar. Villegas, too, knelt, rejoicing at his friend's action.

"Praise the Lord! Friend Miguel, you have won many victories, but this is your greatest! The peace of God be with you."

Juan Valera wept in silence.

The crowd outside heard the whisper, "She is dead!" run through it. Hostile, it became friendly. Jeering turned to

remorseful quiet, and caps came off. When Don Miguel left the church later, no one was there.

"Come, Juan Valera, friend," said Don Miguel in his old, gay voice.

Valera's chin went up at its sound, and he touched his dagger. They went to the house that had been theirs. Servants ordered them away, but Miguel and Valera struck and the guards went down.

Not long afterward a figure clad in the full armor of the old days rode majestically out of the Casa Moncada. Don Miguel was off to war. Toledo plate, shining like a mirror, covered his body, breast and back. He wore greaves and boots and gauntlets and a suit of mail. A white plume floated from his helmet. His sword hung at his side, mace and battle-ax at the saddle bow. His pennon bore the golden hawks of the Moncadas. His horse, too, was armored, back, sides and head: a sharp horn of steel thrust from its forehead; black and gold trappings swept the ground.

Valera rode to one side of Don Miguel, his crossbow at his back and a full quiver of quarrels at his belt. Don Miguel rode at a sharp canter, so that no word would find his enemies ahead of him. He looked once at the sun knowing that he would not see it set.

Quiet hovered over the plaza of Seville. The bloody stake stood before the black-hung stage. The cathedral was golden with sun; the Santa Casa, dark with shadow. The quiet was broken by the brazen sounds of Don Miguel's armor and trappings as he rode across the plaza with the Sanbenito streaming from his shoulders like a cloak. He did not ride for Urbino's house: he was leaving Urbino to the phantoms who must throng his dreams and would haunt his death-bed. He rode to battle the dragon of which he had spoken to Juan, not to avenge his family or himself. At the Santa Casa he pulled his horse to a halt.

Meanwhile Valera had climbed to the top of a thick-leafed chestnut tree and found the square. He watched, tears in his eyes, as Don Miguel's shining figure moved across it. Valera had his last orders from his friend and master. Already the people of Seville were gathering in silent groups.

Finally, from the Santa Casa dark figures moved into the sunlight. Among them were men armed with spears, crossbows and swords. Last of all came the man in white for whom Moncada waited. He saluted his enemy with his lance. Then his voice rolled across the square, hollow from the helmet's depths but clear.

"Inquisition! Spawn of the Devil, I challenge you! No one person but all of you. I fight for God! I claim by my body and soul that you fight for the Devil! You leeches feeding on the blood of men! I call to the church, I call to Spain to throw off this foul work of darkness or this unhappy country will be cursed for hundreds of years. Inquisitor! I challenge you. Speak, man of evil!"

The Inquisitor raised both hands and answered Don Miguel.

"Infidel! Today the church forgave you. Now you challenge her. You are an infidel. By the bones of the Saints, by the words of the Book, by all the Apostles, I will see that you are pronounced excommunicate! You shall burn in hell. There will be no more forgiveness for you or yours, here or hereafter!"

"Nay!" shouted Don Miguel. "I challenge not the church. I *defend* the church! May God strike me dead this moment if the Inquisition is not of the Devil!"

At his words thick silence dropped over the plaza. The crowd held its breath and stepped back, expecting to see the lightning bolt. Don Miguel rose in his stirrups and thousands heard his shout.

"Holà! By all the Saints I fight the Devil! Had ever a knight so worthy an enemy before? Guard you, servants of hell. Moncada and Castille!"

And he charged.

There were twenty men between the knight and the Casa, and the fight rolled across the plaza like a storm among shouts and cries of pain. Above it all rang the war cry, "Santiago and Spain! Moncada and Castille!"

Arquebusiers aimed their heavy weapons, but men saw them fall to earth without firing. Valera's eyes were clear now, and, afterwards, spectators swore they had heard the Moncada war cry coming from the sky.

Not all the arquebusiers and crossbowmen went down. Some arrows glanced from Don Miguel's armor; others found their mark and blood darkened the silver on his steel thighs. The fight moved closer to the Casa where the Inquisitor stood with upraised arms. An arquebus roared, El Capitan reared high, smashed a man beneath his hoofs and sank to the ground, dead. Moncada leaped from the saddle, crest and head still high. Half his opponents were on the ground. Though the war cry was growing weak, the sword still swung. Priests were praying before the Casa, and Valera cursed the bad luck that kept the Inquisitor out of range. A

troop of soldiers, summoned from the castle, clattered across the square. Their officer hesitated at the sound of the war cry, then, with sorrow, gave the order to charge. There was a last fierce struggle.

Deep in the shadow of the Santa Casa the white crest reeled. Once more the war cry rang across the plaza. Then Don Miguel de Moncada turned his eyes toward a fading sky, rested his back against a square pillar and died.

The dragon was unconquered but badly shaken. The crowd noticed that the Inquisitor lay in a white heap before the door of the Santa Casa. No wound was found, but he was dead. It was a long time before another auto-da-fé was held in Seville. The king of Spain, saddened at the death of so famous a soldier as Don Miguel de Moncada, ordered an investigation into the procedures of the Inquisition. That was Don Miguel's monument. He was buried in a nameless grave without prayer or priest.

In his hut in a hidden valley Juan awoke, feeling alone. A cuckoo had called in the night, and now he lay listening to the stream outside his door. Then there came a well-known step and in a moment Valera knelt by him.

"What is it, Juan Valera, my friend?"

When Valera told him of the afternoon, Juan neither cried nor cursed nor spoke. He felt deep sorrow and immeasurable loss, but in his mother's death and in his father's victory through death, he found no bitterness. Valera gave him his father's letter.

My most beloved son, your mother left us today, left us with arms free to do what we must. She died with your name on her lips. A wise and good woman is God's masterpiece on earth. She made me know that she had never lost God and she showed Him to me again. I know that we will meet again soon. Together your mother and I will wait for you.

This is my message to you. Hate not God or the church. They have not done this thing. Hate the men who do evil in God's name. Fight them as a Moncada should, wherever and whenever you can. When you read this, I will have struck a blow in that fight. There are good men everywhere. Fight for them.

And so, Juan, farewell. Know that you have made your father proud of having fathered you. Know that you have made your mother's life a happy one. I pray only that you

will live a life as long, as full, as happy and as happily ended as that of your father.

May you go with God.

Juan sat back on the bench, the message strengthening him like a drug. He was perfectly calm, but very lonely. As he moved, his back throbbed. He stepped to the door of the hut.

"Ea, Valera?"

"Aye, Juan. I'm here."

"Have we horses?"

"Yes. I have two—fast enough and they're fresh."

There was a faint question in Valera's voice; he sounded almost fearful. Juan smiled.

"We'll leave the horses below the city and find a boat. We'll dodge the watch that way."

"Aye. You're right." Juan noticed, smiling again, the deep relief and pleasure in Valera's voice.

The old wolf, thought Juan as he eased into his doublet. He was afraid I was going to run for the hills without slitting Urbino's throat.

They rode together toward Seville like men going home to bed. They carried food for the hills and were well armed. A willow thicket hid the horses and they found a boat easily. Valera rowed across. It was a dark night, but there was light low on the water. As they drifted under the shelter of a wharf the only sound was of water dripping from the oars, until, from the city, they heard the far-off chant of the watch.

"Twelve by the clock. Bless God and all's well."

Juan and Valera walked from the waterfront, avoiding the taverns and lighted houses. They moved without furtiveness but quietly and quickly. They turned from the square at Urbino's house down the alley at its side until they came to a place where the ivy crept thick and heavy-stemmed.

"Wait here, old friend," said Juan, stepping to the wall.

Valera snorted softly. "Like my old grandfather! I come too, Juan, or no one goes. Now, wait a moment. What's the plan?"

"Enter, walk until we find someone—a servant or a guard or the Devil—and make him lead us to Urbino. After that, I care little."

"The plan is good except that you *must* care. Your father told me to protect you, and unless you want me to die here,

you must get away. Remember that! I know how you feel. I know you would welcome death now, but that feeling will pass, Juan, it will pass. A man can survive sorrow. I know. And, Juan, you must add honor to the name of Moncada. You hear me? You must!"

Juan gripped his friend's hand in the dark.

"You're right, El Chato. I agree. Now, in the name of God, let's go!"

Ten feet apart they went up the wall. Juan came to a closed window which he opened with his thin dagger. He stepped in and listened. There was no sound of breathing. It was a storeroom. He stepped aside to let Valera enter. Juan opened the door calmly and they walked into a long dark corridor and down a flight of stairs, hoping to meet someone.

"Hush. Somebody's coming," said Valera.

A faint light appeared down the corridor and they stepped through the door of an empty room. It was a servant. In one hand he carried a lighted candle. In the other, a tray of wine bottles.

He was jerked into alarmed wakefulness by an arm around his neck. Before he could cry out, a hand went over his mouth and another hand, holding a dagger, was before his eyes.

"A slit throat if you make a noise, man! Lead us to Urbino, your master."

The terrified man nodded violently. Valera put the point of the dagger between his shoulders, pressing just enough to prick the skin. In terror the servant led the way. He stopped before a door edged with light. From behind it came the sound of a song.

"How many, man?"

"Four, your honor. Don't kill me, don't kill me! I'll be quiet. I haven't seen your faces! For the love of God, don't . . ."

Valera stepped back and swung the heavy dagger, butt first. It caught the man back of the ear and his prayer stopped as he fell limply forward. The noise of his fall sounded loud. Valera knelt quickly over him to be sure he was safe, and as he did so, the door swung open and a man stood above him.

"What goes on here? I heard a noise . . . Holy Mary! Ea, Martin, Rafael . . . to me!"

It was Urbino, and he'd seen his man with Valera kneeling by him, the blade of the dagger picked out by the light

from the door. Juan lunged at him but his foot caught in the fallen man's leg and he half stumbled, giving his enemy time to leap back into the room. Bitter rage swept through Juan.

"Moncada and Castille!" he shouted and ran into the room. He heard Valera's startled oath and his footsteps close behind.

"It's Moncada!" he heard Urbino shout incredulously. "Moncada, the heretic. Kill him, get him! Guards! Guards!"

Juan swept a chair from his path and went after Urbino who, with his three companions, had his sword out. Urbino dodged back of two of the men. Juan crossed swords with the first of them. Urbino ran for a door at the side of the room. Juan caught his opponent's sword on his, the blades rasped, the ornate hilts locked together, and Juan threw the man and his sword aside and lunged for Urbino who was already nearly through the door. Juan's sword caught him in the cheek, pierced it, tore free to one side and Urbino fell through the door, closing it behind him. Juan wrenched at the door handle, but it was locked and barred.

"Help, Juan! Quick!"

He whirled to find Valera behind him trying to beat off the combined attacks of three men while he protected Juan's unguarded back. Valera was bleeding from a cut on the chin, he stumbled, an opponent thrust, and the blade would have reached its mark had not Juan managed to parry it with a frantic slash. He was at Valera's side. Despair, loss and his pent-up wrath boiled in him. He parried once, thrust to draw the guard clear, then lunged fiercely. His point passed without a perceptible check through the throat of the man before him. Juan, for a frozen moment that seemed longer, saw the man, mustached, bronzed and human, looking with eyes of horror at the steel protruding from his throat. Juan watched the man realize that he stood alone with death. Then the face was no longer human, and he fell. Juan saw Valera hit his man in the stomach and heard the loud-voiced shout of pain. The third man disengaged his sword and ran from the room.

"Now it's murder too, Juan!" cried Valera. "Remember your promise. We must get out of here!"

Already the house sounded to shouts and the thud of running feet. Juan slammed the door behind them as they left the room and ran down the corridor, up stairs and to the right. They expected every moment to see lights and hear the shouts of men who have sighted their quarry. The store-

room was blessedly dark. They swung from the window, half-climbed, half-fell down the wall and ran cat-footed down the alley. They turned, ran across a dark square and into another murky alley. Far behind them they heard shouts and the clatter of the running watch.

The waterfront was dark, but as they passed a tavern, a door swung open and golden light flashed out on them. The men in the door saw two men running. One had blood on his face and both had drawn swords. They made no attempt to follow.

As the boat swung into the current, Juan and Valera saw torches on the bridge below and heard a drum roll. Valera kicked the boat loose as they jumped ashore. Before another minute had passed they were in their saddles, and the road was beneath them. They broke into a gallop. The night wind was cool on Juan's face. Far ahead he could see the dark outline of the hills against the shining stars, and he began to feel sane once more.

CHAPTER 7

The mountains received Juan Moncada and Valera. Time moved with mechanical lifelessness until they recovered from shock and became aware of the season.

The May sun was warm enough to be pleasant and its heat baked out the rich smell of pine needles. Beyond the pines were rocks and sage, and beyond them the mountainside fell away. A magpie shuttered down close by, black and sharp white, the azure on his wings showing as he folded them. Valera sat on a stone and looked moodily over the desolate scene: dark green pine, yellow furze and endless miles of rock and scrub.

"God help me! This is no life for a man, Juan. Out in the Indies, now, there are white-beached islands with the sea foaming over the sand, sweet fruits to eat, strange sights to see and, more than all, a chance for a new life."

Juan Moncada continued to look down at a piece of wood from which he whittled long white slivers. He was vastly changed. His beard was grown out, and he had dyed it and his hair black. With his sorrowing, unsmiling face he looked far older than he was. Valera sighed.

A band of mountain outlaws had taken them in; mountain men asked no questions. But even outlaws kept some ties with the church and Juan had taken a new name: Gonzales Guerrero. Valera had quickly won the affection of the band with his knife throwing, juggling and the manner in which he could swallow a marevedi and extract if from the ear of a companion. Juan's deep melancholy they recognized and avoided, for they had seen sad men before. They left it to time to make a change.

"Juan," said Valera, "let's go to the Indies. Here there's nothing for us but a wolf's life, eating what we can, drinking when we can get drunk, little comfort and no peace. What say you, Juan?"

"No, Valera, I'll stay in Spain. You go; it would grieve me greatly, God knows, to lose you, but here I must stay."

Valera had tried several times to persuade Juan to leave Spain, but Juan still nursed the determination to get his hands on Urbino. What he really hoped was that he might be able to force Urbino to confess his responsibility for the false accusation of the Moncadas. It was barely possible, in that case, that Juan might be able to win a pardon. All evil stemmed from Urbino's lies, even the death of the man in Urbino's own house.

When Juan thought dispassionately he realized he was hoping for a miracle, hoping for the miracle that would restore Alisa to him. She had failed him. She had believed in his disgrace, but she had said she loved him still. If he could finish Urbino and clear his name, life might still have much to offer. It might even be good and gay again. In Spain he could cherish these hopes. In the Indies they would be forever lost.

"Still dreaming of getting Urbino, Juan?" asked Valera.

"Yes," answered Juan, not telling all his dream.

"I thought so. Listen to me, Juan. On this last trip for food and wine the herder from whom we got the sheep was friendly. I talked a long time to him. He is from close to Seville. He gave me news."

Juan leapt eagerly to his feet.

"News? News of whom? What did he say? Tell me, Valera!"

Valera looked up from the fragments of sage he was shredding in his fingers.

"He said nothing directly of the Señorita Alisa," he said, gently. "But he did say that Montejo had left Seville with all his household. He is said to have planned to take a ship

from Cadiz for the new world. I suppose he has sailed by now."

"Name of God! Alisa in the Indies? That's hard to believe somehow. Well, she's lost to me, come what may, and I have business in Spain."

He spoke firmly, but he was remembering Alisa's clear eyes and the feel of her body against his own. He looked at Valera and met a grim smile.

"There is more yet, Juan. Don Diego Urbino is accompanying Montejo to Santa Domingo; he has become Don Francisco's lieutenant for carrying out his plan of conquest. Before God! Urbino's not the lieutenant I'd want at my back in battle."

Juan felt a mounting excitement. Then his mind caught at a thought. His eyes narrowed and he put a hand on Valera's knee.

"Valera, friend, you care much for me. You've been trying to persuade me to go to the new world. Is that desire behind this news of yours? Is this bird lime?"

"You think I'd lie to you?" Valera's voice was toneless but Juan felt the hurt behind it.

"Only for my own good, old friend," he assured him, feeling remorse but going on. "Know this, El Chato. I'm going to kill Urbino. Nothing will change me in that! It's more than my life; it's a debt I owe the memory of my mother and father. I ask only once, expecting the truth. Is what you have told me true?"

"By my love for your father and by all the saints, it is true! But remember, Juan, it's only a report. There was no reason for the herder to lie, but you know how rumor can grow."

Excitement returned to Juan. Valera's words of a new life in a new world had caught his imagination from the first, and now it seemed that duty and inclination might lie together in the West.

"Aye," he said, pacing restlessly. "He could be wrong, but I doubt it. We know that Montejo planned such a move and Urbino would wish to remain near Alisa." He stopped pacing and turned to look in his friend's eyes.

"Valera, what say you we go to Cadiz? There we can find the truth. If our enemy has gone to the Indies, then, by God, to the Indies we go also! What say you?"

Valera leapt up.

"Say? I say, let's go, friend! Forward to the new world and a new life for you and me! With the help of St. Juan

we'll slit that son of a dog's throat yet. And who knows? Anything is possible beyond the Leeward Islands. Alisa may yet be yours. When shall we leave here? Tomorrow?"

They went southwest under the sun of Spain, through heat and dry wind, through esparto, oak and pine. They slept in their cloaks at night and stopped in herders' huts or lonely inns for food. They wore the leather breeches, wool shirts, long cloaks and wide-brimmed hats of the mountain wanderers, looking precisely like the majority of their dusty-bearded, hard-handed fellow travelers.

Stimulated by the prospect of change and adventure, Juan and El Chato made their journey with lighter hearts than they had known for a long time.

They sold their horses before leaving the mountains. The innkeeper who bought them eyed Juan and Valera slyly while he bargained.

"The saints be my witness, your honors, I'm a man who likes to do favors for strangers on the road." His hands floated, palms up, to his shoulders as he shrugged. "But after all, I am a poor man and will have little use for such beasts. Moreover, the bay is windbroken, I swear by the saints. And see the fetlock on the black? Good lord, friends, I doubt they'll be able to go to the market. Men would laugh me from the town. Alas, friends, I'm a poor man. What would you say to three ducats for the pair?"

Valera staggered backward, tore off his hat, grabbed and tugged at his hair.

"Merciful God! Holy Mary of Barcelona! Saint Sebastian, patron of horsetraders! Gonzales, heard you the man? Windbroken! Windbroken? Come. Let us go. Surely, somewhere in Spain, we can find an honest man!"

With his fists pressed to his forehead, Valera mounted the bay. Gonzales clucked to the black. The innkeeper burst into loud sobs.

"Hard-hearted men! Robbers of bread from the mouths of my starving children! How can the world think only of money? Four ducats for the pair!"

They settled at seven ducats and each side retired from the field at once lest the other see its satisfaction.

That night they searched along the Guadalete River until they found a boat. Juan took a few marevedi from his purse, wrapped them in a bit of cloth and tied it to the tree to which the boat had been fastened.

They traveled at night. The first day they spent in a clump of willows, and next on an uninhabited spit of land

in the bay a league above Cadiz. They waited until after dark to leave it. The night life of the Playa of Cadiz—one of the roughest city districts in Spain—was at its height when Valera finally guided the boat into the shadow of a dock and they climbed stiffly onto it. There they shouldered their saddlebags and lost themselves in the waterfront crowds.

Shortly afterwards, Valera drew Juan into a dingy shop where quantities of clothing hung from hooks. A stooped, gray man in a dark robe hurried to serve them.

"Yes, gentlemen? Clothes? I have all kinds, all good, all nearly new. Sailor's clothes? This way, this way. I can fit you out so well they'd be proud to have you on any galleon in the bay. Here, gentlemen."

They pawed among the clothes and soon had outfits of loose trousers, sleeveless leather jerkins, sailcloth shirts and long, dark blue cloaks of a heavy material. They bought sea bags and went to a back room to change. In a few minutes they were dressed, and Valera brought out a lump of pitch. They braided their hair into pig tails which they tarred. Valera grinned as he fastened small, gold-colored rings in his ears.

"Already got the holes, Gonzales. Hah! I remember when I had them made. I was a young rascal your age, just in from a voyage, full of red wine and a girl on each arm. Never thought I'd wear earrings again. How do I look?"

He stepped back and grinned. He looked like a pirate with his red hair and beard, scarred bronzed face and twinkling blue eyes. The earrings lent the final touch.

"By God! You look as if you'd been born in a beef barrel, fed on liquid tar, cut your teeth on a marlin spike and never been on shore since birth!"

"Good. That's as it should be. Here, let me trim that decoration you wear on your chin. Rub in a little more dye, too. Careful, stop wiggling. There. Still enough to stuff a mattress but a little more human. Now, you trim my beard a bit. Ouch! Stop that pulling! Do you want it out by the roots? God help me! You wouldn't make a barber, Gonzales. Finished? At last. Let's see what our friend will give for our old clothes, then for some wine and some food! My belly rumbles at the mere thought of hot stew."

Juan felt strange in the sailor's garb, but when they walked out on the streets, they attracted no attention at all. Across the cobbled road from the shops was the river where small craft were tied up to the docks. A delicate mist was

in the air, enough to heighten the smell of torches, of wine, of human bodies, of garbage, cooking food, wood smoke and mud flats. An occasional street-woman left a wave of scent behind her so strong that it cut through the general stench and seemed almost visible. Shopmen cried their wares, men laughed and shouted, and once Juan half-tripped over the feet of a man lying drunkenly across the walk. The buildings were quite high, with narrow fronts and barred windows above the street level.

"There, Gonzales," said Valera. "I thought I remembered the place. The House of Delights. It's as good an inn as you'll find on the Playa. When I was last here, it had fewer fleas than most."

There was the smell of good food in the air as they paused before the hospitably opened door. Music and loud laughter came out with the smell.

"Vaya, Chato. In we go. I'm hungry."

They took their sea bags to the cubby hole of a room the landlord showed them—eight feet square with one unglazed window. Two straw mattresses were the only furniture.

"Door's sound, with a strong bar. Good," said Valera. "That's important here. Now for some food. Lead on Jua . . . Gonzales."

They descended to the noisy, candlelit common-room, called for salpicón and were soon eating heartily of the hotly spiced, garlicked mutton stew. A slender, gaudily dressed girl brought them wine. El Chato belched appreciatively, then looked up and saw the girl.

"Ah, young lady," he said. "House of Delights, indeed. What is your name, lover?"

"Emilia, hairy one, and not your lover. Now or ever. Here is the wine. Six marevedi, lads. What? On the score? Not with sailors of your type, friends. I can see by your clothes that you've been a long time without a berth. Go on! Keep your hands to yourself, thief! I vow, a girl needs armor in this house. Aye, Pedro, I come, I come."

So began their life on the waterfront of Cadiz. Days merged into one another, much alike, gray days of discomfort lightened only by the hope of change. If only they could secure passage to the Indies! They couldn't buy passage, their money was sufficient only to keep them at the inn for a couple of months. Moreover, the Casa de Contratacion maintained a rigid control of emigration permits. Applicants must be known and questioned, a process to which Juan could by no means submit.

As the weeks passed, Valera made the acquaintance of one of the minor clerks from the Casa who loved to come to the Playa where so many of life's pleasures could be purchased for little money. Of course there was danger, but he was quiet and diffident and walked small. This clerk confirmed the fact that Montejo, Señorta Alisa and Diego Urbino had sailed for Santa Domingo the previous month. He also left no doubt about the difficulty of getting emigration permits.

"But, amigo, you're a sailor. Keep watching for ships. Many sail for the Indies. See the captain. If he'll take you on, go to the Casa, see the clerk in charge of seamen's papers, tell him your story, and there you are. Simple."

He grinned slyly. He'd seen many of this type. Half the rascals in Cadiz ached to get to the new world but concealed some past crime and dared not apply to the authorities. Oh well, the flat-nosed man's wine was good anyway, even if he was a little sparing of it.

"Caught, by the saints," said Juan to Valera that night. "We'll never get to the Indies, though I'll never stop trying now that I know Urbino's there. We'll rot here, but not for long. Soon our money will be gone. What then?"

"Then, God pardon me, I'll catch some fat clerk or informer or gambler or whoremaster, cut his throat and take his purse. I dislike such things, but I dislike starving even more. Enough of such thoughts. Come, Juan, let's commune with our saints tonight. We've been sparing enough. Tonight let's drink our fill and to hell with care! What say you, my friend?"

Juan looked at Valera. He knew the suggestion was mostly for his own good but a wistful look was in his friend's eyes. Juan slammed his hand on the table top.

"Agreed, El Chato! One night for ourselves. Ea, Emilia! Wine, my love, wine. Two bottles."

His voice rang out over the room. Emilia looked surprised and pleased.

Ay, Maria, she thought, has the sad one awaked? It sounds so. Good. Then she said aloud, "I come, Señor Guerrero. Two bottles of the good red wine."

Juan de Moncada thrust from his mind, for a time, the ghosts of his parents, the hatred of Urbino, the fear of the Inquisition's stake and the longing for Alisa. He became truly Gonzales Guerrero, Gonzales the Warrior. The pungent wine, the pleased reaction of Valera and the warmth of Emilia's body on his lap increased his mood of reckless-

ness. He felt as though he were pouring a libation to the gods of luck, pouring the wine into his own throat to be sure, but still putting his fate in the hands of fortune. To hell with caution, with quietness and skulking!

"Come on, Valera, here's to luck, here's to new chances, here's to us. Drink, man!"

Men gathered slowly about them, warmed by their gaiety. It became a festive evening. It was an evening of triumph when Valera got the landlord in the clear space before the tables. The landlord was demanding payment for the next half dozen bottles of wine in advance.

"Money?" asked Valera in mock astonishment. "Money, did you say? Six and thirty marevedi? But, my host, I have paid you already. Six times it seems to me! But here, once more, and let no one say that Juan Valera is not an honest man." He held out his hand, palm up, tossing in its hollow a little pile of silver. "See there? Forty marevedi, honest sir. Here, it is yours."

He tossed the money again, closed his hand, waved it about a bit, held it over the landlord's outstretched hand and opened his fingers. Nothing came out. Valera showed his empty hand to the audience and stared in surprise at the angry man before him.

"Still hanging around me, host? Why? Have I not just paid you forty marevedi for a charge of six and thirty? Go, and bring me back my change."

"Paid me? I have no money from you, you rogue! By the Virgin, give me my money or it's no more wine for you and into the street in the bargain!"

Juan laughed until the tears came, but others in the audience were not so easily amused. They were certain Valera had given the host his money, and besides, they planned on sharing the bottles. Two sailors had joined them some time before and, now, one of them lurched forward. He was drunk but still in that happy state where a man feels that he can be made infinitely happier by more of the drink that has already done so well by him.

"Thief!" he roared at the landlord. "My mate and I saw our friend pay you! Ay, didn't we, Rodrigo? And rot your filthy soul, speak truth for once!"

"Pay? Money? Aye, Jorge, we both saw Flat Nose pay that rascal piles of money. A good mate he is, a good messmate! He'll see that two poor seamen sailing on the morrow for the lousy Indies don't start the journey sober. Bring the wine, rascal, quick now, or I'll slit your throat!"

A quick glance passed between Valera and Juan. These two sailors must have papers of some sort. Here might be the chance! Valera went at once to the rescue of the landlord who was being menaced from all sides.

"Here, good friends, here! Let our noble landlord be. I see my error now. I see my error. Curse me, but I grow careless! This wine is so strong that I must be a trifle befuddled. Look, friends, I thought I had put the money in our benefactor's hands. Instead, I put it in his ear. A foolish thing. Behold."

With those words Valera reached out and before the eyes of the excited men plucked coin after coin from the red ear that stood like the handle of a pitcher from the landlord's head. Some of the men crossed themselves and cursed. Witchcraft! Spirits! The man must be in league with the Devil! Others roared with laughter. As for the two sailors, they were so far gone that they took the whole affair as a matter of course, swaying back and forth, looking with a gratified owlish wisdom at the stunned landlord. Valera dropped the coins in the landlord's hand, and then added two more.

"Bring the wine, good host, and pray add to it a bottle of good brandy. Nothing's too good for men who sail to the West, eh, friends?"

There was loud and ready agreement. Men stopped crossing themselves to reach for the bottles. Juan and Valera took the two sailors aside to their own table and put the brandy before them. Valera shuddered as he watched them swallow the brandy chased with cups of wine. They talked freely, in words that grew more and more fuzzy. They had, it appeared, been on the list at the Casa for a ship plying the Mediterranean.

"No new world for us!" mumbled Jorge. "We've been there, we have. Filthy ships, rotten fever, heat to sicken, more bugs and stinging, crawling things than a man could ever count. That damned Casa!"

A lading galleon, the Adargo de Barcelona, was, at the last moment, short-handed. Jorge and Rodrigo had been called to the Casa de Contratacion, handed letters to the captain and ordered to report before the ship sailed for Santa Domingo—now a matter of hours.

"Why do you go if you don't like it?" asked Juan.

"What?" hiccupped Jorge in surprise. "Not take a berth the Casa orders you to take? Splendor of God, man! It would be the last berth you'd ever be offered. You'd rot ashore

the rest of your life." Mumbling over such ignorance he took another pull at the brandy and wine. Juan fumbled for his pouch, brought it out and weighed it visibly in his hand. He shook his head.

"A thousand devils, friends! My pouch grows as light as a starved rooster's tail feather. Harrow and alas! 'Tis ever so when a man has found good companions, when the wine flows smoothly and Emilia's eyes are brightest that the money runs out."

The sailors' faces fell. They looked around the room avoiding Juan's face, but they brightened again when he added:

"But what the hell! I have yet much drinking to do. Come, lads. Let's go upstairs to our berth. Down here there are too many thirsty gullets ready to drink with too few ready to buy."

"Nah!" grunted Valera, reaching for his glass. "Let's stay here."

"Ho!" roared Rodrigo, standing up. "Come, flat-nosed one. Up with you. The Devil! I think Gonzales' idea prime."

"Aye," said Jorge, sagging against the table and trying to swallow a hiccup. "Careful!" he explained to himself. "Careful, man, it's wine you need." Then to the others he said, "Speed, comrades. It draws near to the middle watch and the Adargo sails on the morning tide."

Valera let himself be persuaded. They got more brandy and climbed weavingly up the steep stairs. Juan and Valera had to support their companions up the second flight of narrow, winding steps. Their loud, happy voices echoed on the walls of the narrow corridor down which they groped. Juan opened the door and they stumbled into the dark room where there was a faint glow of light from its one window. Valera cursed over the flint and steel until the wavering yellow glow of a candle filled the room. Juan closed the door while the sailors seated themselves on the mattresses. Valera opened bottles and put them in eager hands.

"Here's to you," said Juan, pretending to drink. The other three drank—Valera to hide his trembling. Juan went on. "Friends, how is the captain of this ship on which you sail? By God! I hope he's an able man, for your sakes. It can make all the difference in a voyage."

"Good captain?" said Jorge, fumbling at his pouch. "Are there such? I have never met one. As for this captain we do not know him, never having been on his ship. We have our cursed letters from the Casa; we take them aboard,

show them to the captain and that's all. Here, look, here's my letter. Curse it! Curse the Casa. 'Twas the ports of south Italy I'd meant to fetch this voyage. The women there, boys, the women! Soft, willing, and full of fire, singing little songs as they love. And the wine!"

He fell over on the pallet and began to sob.

Juan opened the square of parchment and held it to the candle.

To: Captain Fernan d'Arias, Galleon Adargo de Barcelona, from Lope de Estungia, Chief Clerk, Casa de Contratacion, Greeting.

The bearer is a qualified and loyal seaman. He is sent you by the Casa in response to your urgent request of this date. Done at the Casa de Contratacion, Cadiz, this twenty-seventh day of May, Anno Domini 1511. Signed. Lope de Estungia.

"Aye, I see. Look, friend Jorge, do you . . ."

He stopped speaking. Jorge's sobs had given way to snores. Rodrigo rolled over on the other bed, lifted himself to his elbow and mumbled:

"Lookit 'im. Look. Calls himself a man. Drunk a'ready. Can' hold 'is wine. Cursed strong wine, though. Gotta get up, gotta wake Jorge, go ship." He staggered to his feet. Valera picked up the brandy and steadied Rodrigo, clasping him tightly around the shoulders.

"Aye, poor Jorge shouldn't drink with men like us, eh, Rodrigo? Look, man, your face is pale! Tell you what you need, you need a drink. Tha's what you need. Here, Rodrigo, a true Catalonian like you can hold his wine! Here, have a drink."

Rodrigo expanded at the praise. Valera and Juan looked at him with admiration. He'd show them! He, Rodrigo Bulvar would show them! He took the brandy bottle, raised it to his lips and swallowed steadily while a man might count to seven. He brought the bottle down, peered around him, started to speak and slumped to the floor. Valera caught him, eased him onto the bed and stretched him out. He ripped open his pouch and brought out a second letter exactly like the first.

"Best tie them up, Juan. I'd swear they'll sleep until tomorrow night, but you can't tell with this leather-stomached breed. God! Red wine and brandy!" Valera shuddered.

They tore bedding into strips and tied the two men se-

curely. They threw their own few belongings into sea bags, stood up and looked at each other.

"Hard on those two lads," said Juan.

"Ease your mind, Juan. They'll have a little trouble. They'll say they were attacked and robbed, the landlord will bear them witness, and perhaps their next ship will take them to Italy. Think of us, my friend. We take the long chance, but the saints are with us. Hola, Juan! See how the saints help a man who refuses to mope and wail! This shows the way to good fortune. Come, Juan. Let's go."

No one noticed them below in the common-room. Men still sang and argued. Several lay asleep, and the landlord was not in sight.

"Here comes Emilia," said Valera. "Good. I wouldn't want to go without saying farewell."

The girl came tiredly across the room to them. Her face showed surprise at the sight of the sea bags.

"Art leaving, you two? I'll be sorry to see you go. Is it good fortune you go to?"

As she spoke Juan realized that this land beneath his feet was the last Spanish soil on which he might ever walk. Forever is a long time.

"Aye, little one," answered Valera. "We leave you. Whether to good fortune or bad only the saints know. Come, bid us farewell."

Then, roughness and gaiety vanished like frost before the sun, and he swept Emilia into his arms with a quiet, almost reverent hunger. It was only a cheap tavern girl he held, but through her he said good-bye to all the women of Spain, to the women he had truly loved and upon whom he had only to look to be enriched. The comrades, the women he'd toyed with, the companions of a night, the objects of dreams, the warm core of life, Valera bade them, too, farewell. Forever is a long time. Then, gaiety returning, he turned Emilia around and with loving thoroughness patted her rounded seat through the thin fabric of her skirt. He met Juan's eyes.

"Good fortune, comrade."

Something in his manner told the girl that this was no ordinary bawdy gesture. She stood quietly looking at them both with questioning eyes. Juan stepped to her and took her in his arms. He felt her warm, soft body. He kissed her lips, and they were suddenly wise and kind and loving beneath their hardness.

"Good fortune, old comrade, and farewell. A thousand thanks for your kindness, sweetheart."

He, too, patted her rump, feeling her soft, muscular buttocks through the cloth, feeling them move under his hand, feeling that, had his mind been less burdened, he might have . . . In hard, lonely days he'd think back on the girl and know the half-rueful, half-sheepish sting a man feels at neglected opportunity.

They went out of the tavern, down the quieting street and across the echoing dock. They found a boatman still awake. The noises of the Playa came softened over the water as oars splashed and the boat moved slowly through the curling mist.

CHAPTER 8

The mist was thin. While the shore lights still showed dimly through the vapor, the quarter lanterns of the Adargo de Barcelona became visible from where she swung at anchor. Juan's companions were silent. The fog blanketed the world of sound, and noise came to the ear dim and fuzzy like half-heard echoes. Juan writhed on the thwart as a trickle of icy water seeped under him.

When they were nearly under the galleon's stern, they could see the wide, ornate windows of the great cabin glowing with light and hear the sound of music. A woman's laugh drifted down from a pair of shadows on the captain's gallery —the soft, promise-filled laugh of a woman telling a man she would complete that farewell with love. The rays of light from lanterns and windows gleamed on the magnificence of the galleon's stern: its gold, azure and silver carving, its statues, its motto and the large gold and scarlet emblem of the crown.

Juan and Valera rounded the stern into shadow again and came alongside the ship to larboard. Little waves rasped the boat up and down against the galleon's sides. The smell of tar, planking, and sickly bilge was carried to them on a bed of fog.

"Boat ahoy," came a bored voice from the shadows above them. Valera grinned. It sounded as if the officer on deck resented the intrusion.

"Two seamen for the Adargo, sir," Valera answered.

The gruff voice was immediately brisker.

"Seamen, eh? By the bowels of St. Christopher, good! Come aboard—or must I rig a sling for you? Cursed few sober enough for the ladder."

As Juan stumbled from the bulwarks onto the deck, which was dimly lit by two lanterns, Valera followed close behind. They could hear the squeak of the oarlocks as the shore boat pulled away. A short, broad man with gleaming white teeth and a black beard stood before them.

"Well! Will you stand here the whole watch or will you show me your papers, rogues? Come, your papers."

Juan handed the man his letter, and fear gripped his belly. The bearded man held it to the lantern and read through it with moving lips. He looked up,

"Names? Juan Valera, eh? And you? Yes, yes. Gonzales Guerrero. Guerrero. That's a lousy name for a seaman. Ah well, ye'll likely be a lousy seaman, too. I am Luis Aleman, sailing master. You two will be in Felix Rosa's larboard watch. Rosa is the boatswain; he'll doubtless lead you a sad life. It's your watch below; all hands will be called at two bells of the morning watch. Keep your papers with you for inspection by Casa officials in the morning. That's all. Here, boy. Show these men to the fo'c'sle."

A young boy with a pale pinched face appeared from the shadows, and led the way, carrying one of the lanterns, across the cluttered deck. The straight black lines of the rigging seemed to move in the swinging light, making crazy traceries in shadow on the decks.

"Say," muttered the boy, "have you two got a nip on you? St. Christopher, what a head and belly I've had today! They feel likely to part company, and I need a slug to quiet 'em. What say?"

"Say? All I say is the only nip you need is mother's milk, and I don't carry that on board ship with me, more's the pity! St. James, Gonzales, did you hear the baby? A nip!"

The boy cursed with an amazingly foul and endless string of oaths. Juan reached for him, but he danced out of reach.

"Yah! Ye want a light? Leave me be. Oh, the bosun'll fix you two all right. Here. Here's the fo'c'sle."

Juan ducked through the low door and stopped as the smell of dirty bodies, urine, vomit and bilge water struck his nose like a solid wall. The lantern showed a triangular cave, the sides lined with rough wooden bunks. Most of the bunks contained sleeping figures, a few of whom stirred and cursed

at the light. Other men lay sprawled on the deck where they had fallen or been dropped.

"God!" Juan gulped. "What a stench! Must we breathe that?"

"Pretty rank," agreed Valera. "But you'll get used to it. Little worse tonight than usual; sea winds'll clear it out some. Come on out, we'll sleep under the long boat over there. Not much sleeping time left anyway."

They groped their way across the deck, rolled in their cloaks on the planking and pillowed their heads on their sea bags.

The deck was above the fog and Juan could see the skyward climb of the foremast with the yards way up against the sky bright with stars. The ship swayed slightly in the harbor chop. Valera began to snore softly at his side. He himself felt all the wakefulness of the pre-dawn hours on a day of battle. That memory made his qualms familiar. Finally, they quieted and he lay in peace until a roll of drums and loud shouting woke him. Valera sat up on the deck with a groan, his cloak falling from his shoulders as he rubbed his eyes and looked about. It was daylight, the gray light of first dawn which made Valera's lined face look hard and colorless. He looked at Juan and grinned.

"On your feet, Juan, we're common sailors now. It comes back. Two bells, the fifth hour of the day. Come. Let's take our sea bags to that palace where we now dwell."

The forecastle was a raucous place. A burly man in dark pants, white stockings, a red and white shirt and a red cap was shouting and threatening vast and awful punishments as he rolled still drunken men from the bunks or, on deck, kicked them to their feet.

"Haste, sons of pigs! On your feet there, you rascals. Up with you, or by St. Paul, I'll have you meet the master at arms and the lash! All hands, all hands! Are you deaf now?" Turning, he saw Juan and Valera coming in from the deck. "What the hell do you want here? On deck with you, on deck!"

"Aye, on deck it is," answered Valera. "We only wanted to stow our gear on an empty bunk. We bedded down the night on deck."

"Well, what are ye waiting for? Mother of God! There are two places. Haste now. Who are you? Who? Valera? Guerrero? Oh, you're the pair Aleman put in *my* watch, eh? We'll see to that."

"Off with your shoes, Gonzales," murmured Valera. "Salt

water will rot them; besides you're surer-footed on your own soles. You'll need to be, like enough. We'll have to go aloft before this morning's over."

They emerged into a confusion of cursing men hauling on ropes. Smoke began to rise from the flat stone hearth amidships under a protective shed. Juan and Valera were set to work scrubbing down. As Juan hauled buckets of water from over the side and sloshed them across his section of the deck, he looked around him.

He was forward near the foot of the foremast which carried a web of standing and running rigging. The forecastle rose above the main deck of the waist for two decks. The seamen slept on the main deck level, the soldiers in the space above them. From the forecastle to the waist there was a drop of fourteen feet. The Adargo was three-masted: the fore and main bore two square sails each, and the mizzen carried a triangular lateen sail. The high poop deck aft seemed a good distance from Juan, and it towered considerably above him into the air. It was three decks above the main deck, and bore the great cabin, stepped far enough back from the break into the waist to allow room for the binnacle and whipstaff. She was brilliant with new paint and gold leaf. The quarter lanterns aft, half as big as a man, gleamed in their ornate bronze. The decks were white and smooth.

As a soldier, Juan looked for armament. He saw heavy guns in the waist and on the gun-deck below. On the forecastle and on the poop were mounted murderers and falconets—light brass guns on pivots—designed to pour masses of bullets into any enemy trying to board ship.

The shouts of the boatswain cut through all the noises. Men with throbbing heads winced at his roars, even when it was the welcome notice that food was ready—boiled salt fish and hard bread. While they finished eating, the boatswain swaggered once more across the decks.

"Fall in," he yelled. "Two ranks there, according to watches. Bones of St. Peter! Still stuffing yourselves? Finish, in the name of God, and into your places!"

Drums rolled, and Juan saw a boat, rowed with business-like briskness and carrying the standard of Spain, approaching the ship. The officials from the Casa. He looked at Valera. Valera was a little pale, but he smiled as he turned to Juan.

"Hope we patted the fair Emilia's rump sufficiently, Gonzales. Pray to St. John. I do likewise."

The sailors were in two ranks. Juan and Valera were on the larboard side of the ship. From aft came the gleam of armor as soldiers fell into their ordered ranks. The gentlemen aboard stood quietly behind the ship's officers on the starboard side; the commoners were on the larboard. The captain, in scarlet and white, stood by the binnacle and whipstaff.

The officials came aboard and went first to the soldiers and gentlemen. There was a long and aching wait while Juan's belly grew heavier and colder. Then a brisk and scornful man, holding a handkerchief to his nose with very white hands, started moving slowly down the line of the larboard rank of sailors.

He was talking with the fourth man ahead of Juan, the third man. With the second man ahead there was some difficulty. The sailor protested, but the official insisted brusquely. The sailor left the ranks and one of the soldiers led him aft. Now it was Juan's turn.

Cold, hard eyes bored into Juan's. He met them squarely, careful to allow his face to show only respectful eagerness.

"Name?"

The voice was tenor and completely emotionless.

"Gonzales Guerrero, your honor."

"Where from?"

"Cordoba, your honor."

"Your papers."

Juan handed him the letter, keeping his face unchanged. The official looked at it, read it carefully, then looked up at Juan once more for a long moment. Cold chills prickled up Juan's back; the stake and death by fire lurked behind those eyes.

The official handed him the paper and turned to Valera. The scene was repeated. Juan noticed that Valera's voice was as calm and sure as if he sat at meat in a quiet room. The official left Valera and went on. Like the glass in a kaleidoscope, the world shifted and became bright and warm.

The inspection was over. The sailors broke ranks. Juan saw the captain escort the inspector to the ship's side, saw them climb down the ladder and their boat row away.

"By God, Juan!" murmured Valera with a tremendous sigh of relief. "I thought Emilia's ass felt lucky. We shall sail, my friend, we shall sail!"

The sun was sparkling on the water. Feet pounded the decks and sheaves squealed in the blocks as boats were hoisted in. Juan and Valera tugged with the rest at the boat-

falls, pleased to lose themselves in the anonymity of working men. The tide was full, just turning to the ebb. Gay pennants snapped and cracked in the steady north wind and a cloud of gulls hovered above the ship.

"To the captain, you!" roared the boatswain. "What d'ye think you are? A passenger?"

Juan leaned against the capstan bar, pushing his hardest with the other men when the drum roll ended in a heavy thump. The capstan went round and the anchor cable groaned from the strain as it crawled in through the hawsehole.

Aft, the sailing master looked serenely over the turmoil to the surrounding waters. Tide's ebb had turned the stern toward the mouth of the bay and the forts, Puntalos and Cortadvero, but she would turn easily in the north wind. When the anchor cable hung straight up and down the boatswain waved his hat from the forecastle.

"Set the foresail, boatswain," Aleman shouted.

"Aye, aye, sir. Handsomely now, men. You, Lopez, aloft, up lads, aloft and shake it out. Here you, Valera, Guerrero, Ruval, tail onto the braces. To it, lads, bear a hand now!"

Men swarmed aloft, ran out on the foreyard foot-ropes and cast the big sail loose. It flapped and thundered until Juan and the others sheeted it home and braced the yard around to catch the wind. The harbor shifted about them as the bow came around, and for a moment Juan had a breathing spell.

"Steady as she goes," Aleman ordered.

The helmsman met the vessel's swing with the whipstaff which controlled the rudder, hinged on the main-deck below. The bow pointed straight for the harbor entrance. The men of the starboard watch chanted as they heaved at the mizzen lateen halliards until the sun glinted on the image of St. Christopher painted on the sail. The city and the sand dunes about it moved aft. From the forecastle Juan saw in his mind's eye the broad mouth of the Guadalquiver, out of sight beyond the point.

The Guadalquiver! Twenty-five leagues up that river was Seville, the place of his boyhood, his life. Somewhere up there were the graves of his father and mother. He turned to Valera and put an arm around his shoulders.

"Old friend, that's the last time I'll ever see Spain!"

Juan had little time for grief. In a short while the ship was clear of the harbor and corkscrewing massively in the long Atlantic swell that took her under the starboard quar-

ter. Juan was dizzy. His previous voyages had made him a fair sailor, but it had always taken time for him to find his sea legs. The north wind sang across the decks hard enough to push a man from his path if he lacked support. The Adargo put her nose down and lifted it again, a rainbow formed in the spray, then the stern dropped and more spray flew to land with a brisk impact on Juan and Valera.

"Lord deliver us! Is it a storm, El Chato?" asked Juan as he felt his stomach lurch.

"Storm? This? Why, hell, Juan, this isn't even a half gale —it's just a good breeze! Don't let anyone hear you call this capful of wind a storm. God!"

A shouted order from the quarter-deck blew forward with the wind.

"Set the foretopsail. Lively now."

The boatswain appeared on the heel of the shout.

"Aloft, lubbers! Are ye sailors or not? Here you, Guerrero, up on the yard. Valera! Bear a hand. Up you go, lads."

Juan's stomach lurched again, but he followed Valera to the port shrouds. Valera leaped, caught the ratlines and went aloft.

"Follow me, Gonzales," he called. "Don't look down."

Juan felt the ropes cutting into his feet as he climbed. He kept his eyes aloft. Even the foresail yard seemed high, and, Holy Mother, the topsail yard was even higher! Someone shoved Juan roughly aside and pushed past him.

"Beard of St. Peter! Out of the way, farmer! Look out, Pedro, you'll have to climb over him."

Juan almost lost his footing, recovered it, and went on up the shrouds. At the foretop he clung dizzily to the rigging while the other men swung past and went on up, hand over hand. Valera grasped Juan's arm.

"On up, Gonzales. The bos'n's got his eye on us. Don't look down."

Juan looked down, shut his eyes and swore. The deck looked a quarter league distant and very small. He saw the boatswain, much foreshortened by the height. As he clung, the ship rolled again and Juan, high on the mast, felt the motion redoubled. Resolution returned.

"Moncada and Castille!" he whispered to himself as he grabbed the lines and pulled himself clumsily upward with straining muscles.

"Good lad," said Valera. "Here's the yard. Careful now. Get your foot on the footrope there."

"Out on the yard, farmer," came the voice of the squat,

muscular sailor who'd shoved Juan from his path on the shrouds. He grinned at Juan, showing yellow, broken teeth. "You're a long way from the farm, man." He was obviously enjoying Juan's discomfort, but Juan was too preoccupied to resent it at the moment. He started edging gingerly along the footrope, keeping his stomach curved over the comforting solidity of the yard.

"What's the matter, farmer?" came another jeering voice. "Forget to bring your skyhook?" Juan was pushed roughly against the yard as the man went over him. A strengthening burst of anger helped him plunge out on the yard.

"I'll show the lousy bastards," he muttered. "If they can do it, I can!"

The hands were casting loose the bulk of the topsail and the loosened canvas thundered in the wind. Juan reached for the line near him and tugged at a knot. His foot slipped on the rope and he fell. His right hand slipped from the round yard, a cry came to his lips, his left hand caught the footrope, his right hand clawed the air and then it also closed on the footrope. For a long moment he clung to it, swaying, being battered against the half-loosened sail! He heard Valera's shout of alarm and the boatswain's bellow of rage from the deck. Strong hands caught his wrists. He was pulled upward and half pushed against the mast. Both his arms went around the topmast far more tightly than he'd ever clutched Alisa, and at the moment the hard wood felt better to him than ever a woman's body had.

"Are you all right, Juan?" He heard Valera's anxious question.

"No!" shouted Juan and vomited into space.

"Blood of God! He's seasick! Watch it, lads. He's losing his guts!" somebody shouted.

"Here," said a kindlier voice. "Easy lad. I'll give you a hand. Here, Valera, you take his other arm."

Juan shook himself free.

"No," he muttered thickly. "No, I'll be all right. I'll go down alone."

"Good lad. That's best. Down you go, then. Careful, now."

The look of approval in Valera's eyes helped steady Juan, but he was dizzy and miserable as he made the descent. The wind blew harder and the ship was heeled far over now that the topsails were set and drawing. He looked down once, and there was blue water below him instead of the deck.

His feet touched the planking, its solidity felt warm and

the world steadied again as he felt a firm deck under him once more.

"Mother and father and all the relatives of all the saints! By the bones of Judas!" The boatswain ripped off his red cap, threw it on the deck and stamped on it.

"You, a sailor! A bloody farmer you are! Look, farmer, I'll promote you. I'll teach you not to victimize an honest bos'n by pretending to be a sailor. You're captain of the head for the voyage. Sailor! Bah!"

He turned away, leaving Juan dazed. The sailor who had helped him aloft grinned at him.

"By God, Guerrero. Looks like you've won a name. I fear you'll be the Farmer for some time to come. Well, don't let it worry you. Many a man's had trouble aloft, especially if he wasn't used to it."

He slapped Juan encouragingly on the shoulder, then padded off across the deck. Memory of the boatswain's last words returned to Juan.

"Captain?" he said, turning to Valera. "Captain, captain of what did he say?"

"Captain of the head, amigo. The head, the jakes, the privy. It'll be your job to clean it out twice a day. A nasty job, I'm afraid. Never mind. I'll help you with it."

"No," answered Juan, shaking his head. "I'll do it. Perhaps I deserve it. Mother of God, El Chato! Do you think I'll last to the new world?"

CHAPTER 9

The rest of the day was busy enough to keep Juan from pining. The ship was in the disorder it always is after a stay in port, and the crew was set to work stowing, scrubbing, sanding decks, shifting stores and tightening the standing rigging. It was well into the afternoon before the sailing master was satisfied and gave word for the watch to be dismissed. It was four o'clock and the starboard watch was standing the first dogwatch, from four to six, so Juan and Valera had two hours for their personal affairs and the evening meal.

The forecastle was dark, stuffy and still full of stinks but, as Valera had predicted, the strong sea breeze had swept it

partially clear. Most of their watchmates were in their bunks, though a few gambled on the deck or mended clothing or restowed their chests and sea bags. Two small ports opening aft, toward the waist, admitted some light and air. A horn lantern gave its yellow, wavering light and a certain amount of smoke to the scene.

The two comrades bought a mattress each from a fat, oily sailor named Ladredo. He kept the ship's slop chest. The mattresses were only three fingers breadth in thickness and filled with crackling straw. They put them on the bare, board bunks.

"There's your home, Gonzales," said Valera, patting Juan's pallet. "You have your cloak for cover, though you won't need it much for this voyage. Don't worry about the hardness. After a few days of watch and watch, by the fig of Emilia, you'd sleep even on a cactus plant!"

There were forty men crowded into the forecastle who, after that first nightmare day, began changing in Juan's mind from a gang of hairy brutes to men. They were rough and crude, but they had a few simple virtues which went far toward outweighing their defects. They were honest with each other; they were cheerful in spite of a hard life, and any one of them would share anything he had with a hungry messmate. They pulled together against the effortless, unified opposition of wind and sea.

Manuel Male was the captain's coxswain and therefore a man of considerable authority. He was the squat, muscular seaman who had climbed over Juan on his first trip aloft and who had nicknamed him Farmer.

"Paisano," he said. "Paisano, why did you come to sea? You should be back on the farm. Ea! I suppose Felix Rosa did you a favor making you captain of the head. On farms also men shovel manure, do they not?" He roared with laughter, doubled over, and lurched around the forecastle repeating his wit to any audience he could find. Juan scowled and started after Male.

"Hold, Guerrero," said another seaman, the tall, smooth-shapen man with somber black eyes and the bone-deep tan who had come to Juan's assistance during that nightmare on the topsail yard. His name was Hernando Toledo. "Never strike a man aboard ship, lad. Sea laws are harsh and those who fight are triced to the gratings and given fifty lashes. No anger is worth it, and the Devil! Our Male is not so bad, after all. A rough tongue, to be sure, but a good shipmate. You must learn your place, lad, that's all."

Days passed into weeks. Juan was strong and quick; with the help of Valera and Toledo he soon got past the first awkward stage. He went aloft again, holding down the terrors that had shaken him that first day, and, after a few trips, he began to feel at home in the rigging. However, even though he learned enough seamanship to enable Rosa to leave off tearing his hair each time he gave him an order, Juan still heard that hated name, Paisano, at every turn. Twice a day he cleaned the odorous cubby hole in the bow. Had it not been for the nickname, his job as cleaner of the privy and unofficial butt of the crew's jokes, he would have been relatively happy.

Among the passengers carried by the Adargo were a half-troop of soldiers going to re-enforce the garrison of Santa Domingo. They were under the command of a lieutenant who lived in the sanctity of the great cabin aft. His men saw little of him. They were just as happy because their sergeant, Ramon Argensola, was a good soldier, and they throve under his care. All the soldiers were scornful of the sailors, looking down on them as common laborers. And though sailors were beneath the notice of Argensola, he and the boatswain recognized similar solid values in each other and became quite friendly.

The Cape Verde Islands faded astern. The Adargo was so far south already that by noon the pitch bubbled in the planking and the forecastle became a breathless oven. There was a difference in the feel of the ship now that she was headed due west. The sun rose squarely over the taffrail and the bowsprit stood out in the afterglow of sunset. The wind was strong, usually fair, and the north equatorial current carried them steadily on their way. Nature seemed their ally for this crossing of the thousands of miles of empty ocean.

Juan long remembered one Sunday afternoon, a time of peace, when, in the first dogwatch, everyone except for the helmsman and lookouts was lounging in the waist forward of the mainmast. There was just enough wind to give them steerage way and the gentle roll of the ship was soothing. Above them, the painted sails seemed to touch a few small white clouds that drifted like heavenly galleons on the Adargo's course. A Mass had been sung in the morning, dinner had been served late and plentifully, and many of the men had saved their small wine ration to be drunk at this hour. They were content and relaxed. Juan, Valera and Ladredo lay on the decks at ease in the shadow of the long boat as it lengthened and shortened in the easy rhythm of the ship's

roll. Valera had a can of wine at his side from which he drank at intervals, heaving a sigh of satisfaction after each mouthful.

"A good voyage," said Ladredo, stretching his arms above his head, watching Valera's wine enviously.

"Aye," said Valera. "Good enough. I have but one fault to find—too little wine and no women."

"No women? How about that fine piece aft?"

"She might as well be in Cadiz as far as we're concerned, you rascal. God! I wish she were not aboard. When I see her standing there, her dress pressed tight around her teats by the wind, I long for the voyage to end so that I may have the benefit of such items."

He drank recklessly deep this time, looked in dismay at how little wine was left and stared reproachfully at Ladredo.

"I'd like to see the Indies over the bow myself," said Juan. "Tell me again, Chato, what they're like."

"Like? Oh, hot enough, bugs enough, fevers enough. But flowered and wild and free. They have a drink there called agua ardiente. It's hot enough to burn the lining out of your belly. And everywhere, slim brown girls for the taking. Ah! To see those girls again and fill my hold with that agua ardiente. How it burns!"

"Aye, it does," said Ladredo. "You'll find aplenty to drink, friends, but, truth to tell, the women are getting scarce. No more can a brave lad stroll forth and take his choice of them. They die off: the mines, the whips and the torture—to say nothing of the boys seeking diversion—have been carrying the Indians off like, like, well, worse than the plague in a crowded city."

"By the Virgin, is it so? When I was last in the Indies, some years since, to be sure, it was said there were two million of them on Espaniola alone."

"There's not a tenth that now, friend. The rest are herded to the mines and fields, and men quarrel over them as if they were as valuable as horses. Sad. Fortunes are no longer made so quickly on Espaniola either."

Juan recoiled at the callous cruelty of Ladredo's remarks. They were all the more dismaying because they reflected the selfishness of the average Spaniard toward the unfortunate natives of the islands. Juan's thoughts were diverted by shouts of welcome from the other men.

"Holà! Rafael Quijano and his fiddle. Good! Ho, Rafael, give us a tune."

Rafael, a shrunken, sad creature, accepted the welcome

as his due, seated himself comfortably by the mast, gulped from a can of wine that was put in his hands, and prepared to play.

He looked about him and voices called a dozen suggestions. Now Juan saw why Rafael, small and powerless as he was, was treated with friendly deference by all the hands. He could bring them the gift of music, of forgetfulness of lives made small, of hopes and dreams drowned. Sailors like music.

The first song was a long drawn out wailing affair; the fiddle closed each verse with an almost human sob of pain. Applause followed it. All were eager for more. Next Rafael played the song of the mountains. It was a popular choice. All voices hushed until even the faint talk of the bow cutting through the water could be heard.

"Bravo! Good! A rare player, eh, friends?"

Hernando Toledo made the next request.

"Rafael, lad, how about the *Song of the Virgin?*"

Rafael tucked his withered chin over the fiddle and played the song lovingly. Someone in the back ranks broke into the words in a clear, fine tenor voice:

> Muy graciosa es la doncella;
> Como es bella y hermosa
> Digas tu, el marinero
> Que en las naves vivias
> Si la nave, o la vela, o la estrella
> Es tan bella.

The gentle words and quiet tune ended: this was the sailor's verse and the audience sat quietly, too moved to applaud.

"By my faith!" said Juan. "A lovely song, very well sung. Who was the singer? He sounded good enough to sing in a cathedral."

"Prepare yourself for a shock," said Ladredo, chuckling. "It was none other than your friend, Manuel Male."

"By God! Male? I rise before a miracle! Bulls lisping love songs I could believe, but the coxswain, a sweet-voiced tenor? Juan Valera, have you a taste of wine left? I need it."

Now the fiddler broke into a lively, dancing tune. A shout went up.

"A dance! A dance! To your partners, lads. The ladies! Where are the ladies?"

The quiet group whirled into activity. Juan was puzzled,

the more so when Male, grinning, spied him and hurried toward him holding a rag of sailcloth in his hairy hand.

"Here stands one sweet morsel, lads," he shouted, his black eyes dancing with humor. "Come, little piece, let me wrap the badge of your office around your arm."

He came in fun and the others applauded. Juan caught the humor and found it easy to accept, especially when he saw another white rag being tied around Valera's arm. He executed a deep, mincing curtsy and spoke in a high, affected voice.

"Oh, sir! How you frighten me! Am I to have the honor of this dance?"

Male shouted in approval and whirled Juan onto the open deck among the other bearded couples who were already prancing and jigging. From the corner of his eye Juan saw Valera hurl himself into the waiting arms of Toledo with such fervor that they tumbled to the deck causing shouted applause.

So the dance started. Laughter crowned the decks of the galleon, and Juan suddenly found himself liking his shipmates. He and his whirling partner—he didn't know who his present partner was, he'd changed so frequently and hilariously—were suddenly brought to a complete stop by hitting a pair of solid bodies. There had been a good many collisions during the last hour, but this was different. Juan looked into the sneering faces of two of the soldiers.

"Break it up, girls," said one with a contemptuous look. "Party's over." The music died with a jerk as the fiddler was pushed sprawling to the deck. Shouts of anger arose, but Ramon Argensola raised his heavy voice in a shout.

"Close your mouths, scum! We need this place for our exercises. Clear out."

They drowned him out, and there was a brief scuffle which was quelled by the boatswain and Male.

"I carry out the orders of Lieutenant Narvaez!" shouted Argensola. "By God! Do you seamen dare to go against the orders of a king's officer?"

That settled it. The sailors dispersed, grumbling, cursing the practice that kept Spanish seamen on the level of ditch diggers and put them all under the orders of even a private soldier. The troopers pushed them aside, and one of them dropped an armful of helmets, staves and blunted broadswords near the mast. The sailors were sullen now, their gaiety gone.

"Cursed pike draggers!" swore Ladredo. "Coxcombs!

You'd think they owned the ship! I tell you lads, one day the ships of Spain will again face a real enemy at sea and curse me if this stupid superiority of soldiers over seamen goes on, Spain will get her royal tail whipped. I, Ladredo, say it."

An idea came to Juan as he saw the soldiers picking over the practice weapons. He caught Valera's eye.

"Look, El Chato, here's a chance. Let's take on a pair of these cocks at their own game! What better way to find an entry into the army?"

"Aye. You're right. I'll take the sergeant."

"Oh no. I saw him first. Wait here."

Juan walked toward the sergeant. He heard the muttered questions of his shipmates behind him. A soldier stepped in front of him, and Juan swung him aside so savagely that he tripped and crashed to the deck. A shout of joy went up from the sailors; a growl of anger from the soldiers. Argensola strode rapidly toward Juan who took the sergeant's measure as he came.

Argensola was a grizzled man near forty, short, square and solid, explosively sudden in his movements. He had lost one eye and his dark mustaches were long and drooped around his mouth, hiding its shape. At the moment his face was red with anger.

"You dog, what does this mean? Didn't you hear my orders? All beggarly sailors out of here. Away!"

The man Juan had knocked down came rushing for him, dagger in hand. Argensola stepped between them.

"Halt, Lascado, halt, I say! Do you know the penalty of striking an armed blow aboard ship? The guilty hand is cut off. Back now, no more." He turned to Juan. "As for you, clear out!"

"You're going to play with your pretty toys then," asked Juan, indicating the pile of practice weapons. "Damned if you're not like a group of little schoolboys playing soldier. Ah well, it's ever the way of loud-mouthed braggarts. He who talks the hardest always strikes the softest. Your blows must be soft indeed, sergeant."

The drooping mustache twitched slightly, and the one eye narrowed.

"Loud-mouthed braggarts, say you?" His voice was quiet and controlled; Juan looked at him approvingly. "Soft blows, say you? By my faith, you half-naked, ragged beggar! Would that you had some use of a man's weapons. I'd show you a few of my soft strokes where you'd feel them!"

"Nothing easier. Let us say broadswords. Oh, I mean your

blunted toys over there. It seems one might strike hard blows with them."

Argensola breathed hard and seemed to consider.

"Let me fight him, Ramon!" begged Lascado. "Let me cut his comb for him. By God, I'll batter him until he'll not walk before we reach the Indies!"

Valera had walked quietly up behind Lascado. He swung a mighty, flat-handed blow to Lascado's back that came near sending him to the deck again.

"Ho!" shouted Valera, jovially. "Fight, you say? Can a pretty lad like you fight? I wouldn't believe it. Perhaps you'd show me?"

Again Argensola had to stop the infuriated soldier, furious himself now at the delighted laughter from the sailors.

"A moment, Lascado. A moment, you sailors." He gnawed his mustaches and a gleam lit up his one eye. He looked at Juan shrewdly and smiled.

"So, you'd fight, eh, both of you?"

"Aye."

"Good. This is a friendly fight with blunted broadswords, shields and helmets, right?"

"Right as can be."

"And ye'll not go whining to the master-at-arms with tales of assault if ye get a broken arm or a cracked head?"

"If you'll swear not to hold broken arms against us, we're very agreeable. Come, enough talking. Let's to this game."

The crew was wild with excitement. They ringed the open space talking heatedly and joyfully with the soldiers who made contemptuous wagers on the outcome.

"Love of God!" said Felix Rosa in Juan's ear. "If you lose, this crew will spend little money in Santa Domingo. I swear every man has bet his last copper on you."

"And you, boatswain?"

"Cáspita! What do you think? I, too. Good fortune, lad."

Juan was to fight Argensola, first. Valera put the heavy helmet on Juan's head. It felt familiar and good to have that pressing weight shoving down his chin, the snug-fitting side-pieces for protection. He took the heavy shield and brandished the sword. It was a standard broadsword, but with a rounded point and flat, blunted, cutting edges. The helmets protected necks and heads where these weapons were likely to strike fatal blows, but the body and arms could take a fearful beating. Raw recruits dreaded broadsword practice with an expert more than they dreaded the lash.

"How decide the winner, sailor?" asked Argensola. "I

don't want to really injure you. Shall we play for touches?"

"What you will, Sergeant," answered Juan. "Neither do I want to maim, but a real broadsword fight would not be decided by touches. What say we leave it to each of us to say when he is fairly beaten?"

"Good. I see you know arms. Good. Ready?"

"Aye."

"To it then!"

They advanced on each other, legs bent at the knee, knees apart, walking on toes, ready to spring aside, forward or back. Argensola was old and cool, and he thought the patience of years would tempt his opponent into the first false move. Juan heard the song of the light wind in the rigging, the heavy breathing of the audience, the shuffling of his own bare feet on the deck and the rasp of his opponent's boots on the white planking. Argensola's one eye was cold and dangerous above his shield.

Juan threw his shield to the right, leaped to the left, whirled, took the other's cut on his blade. The impact was strong and inflaming clear to his shoulder. He caught his shield's edge on the other's shield and heaved with all his strength. Argensola grunted as he lost his balance. Juan disengaged swiftly and thrust for the right shoulder. Argensola jerked his shield to the right which left his left shoulder unprotected. Juan thrust like lightning and felt the dull point strike solidly against the other's shoulder. The sergeant cursed and leaped back.

"Good touch, man!" he grunted. "But even if they were sharp, I could still fight. To it, rascal!"

Now Juan was hard pushed. Argensola seemed everywhere. Juan's shield rang with his blows, but he contented himself with parrying the attack, keeping his guard alert and watching for a break. None came. He'd have to make one. His bare feet and light dress gave him the advantage in speed and he used it. Repeated cuts at Argensola's knees brought the sergeant's shield lower and lower. Then Juan feinted, again at the knees, swung to the right, pivoted to the left, ducked under his opponent's swing and slashed from the deck, barely missing the top of the other's shield. His sword rang like a hammer on an anvil against Argensola's helmet. Argensola was hurled to the deck, half stunned, by the heavy impact.

A storm of shouts came from the crew. Juan felt himself being hugged by half a dozen men. He ignored them for the moment. Argensola groaned, sitting on the planks.

He shoved the helmet tenderly from his head, rubbed his scalp, grimaced, swore and said:

"God's wounds! You win. Oh, my head!"

Valera had been one of the best swordsmen in the army in Italy, so Juan had no fears as to the outcome of his fight. He knew El Chato's great strength, the result of his term as a galley slave and a lifetime of activity, but even he was surprised at the blows Valera struck. Lascado was driven back step by step, rhythmically with each blow. His red face turned purple. Shouts rose from the spectators as the shield was smashed back. Now it was against Lascado's belly. One tremendous stroke made Lascado totter; another, against the side of his shield, turned him half around. Valera then shifted his sword in his hand and with a mighty, full-armed swing spanked Lascado on the tail with the flat of the blade! Lascado shot halfway across the deck with a howl of rage that rose even above the shouts of the sailors. Furious, Lascado aimed a hard cut at Valera's face, but Valera dodged, swung, and caught his unfortunate enemy a heavy blow on the point of the right elbow. Lascado's sword clattered to the deck. This time he shouted in pain, fell to his knees and hugged his elbow to his side.

Pandemonium broke loose and the sailors went mad with joy. They danced and shouted while they collected their bets from the crestfallen soldiers. Argensola and Lascado acknowledged their defeats in surly tones and disappeared. The sailor's dance of triumph was ended only by the sound of four measured bells.

"Four bells. Relieve the watch!" the boatswain shouted over the tumult. "Larboard watch on deck. Relieve the helmsman and lookout."

The celebration broke up. Juan's shoulder tingled from the backslapping, his cheek was wet from impassioned kisses of congratulation. He laid down the sword, buckler and helmet and turned to go.

"Where are you going, Guerrero?" asked the boatswain.

Juan was surprised at hearing his assumed name. He had been addressed as Farmer for so long he nearly failed to respond. He growled:

"Up to that fragrant garden of roses I tend each evening, Rosa. You should know. You gave me the job."

"No more, lad, no more. Another has already been sent. Today you made us all love you. You have served your apprenticeship, Gonzales Guerrero. You're one of us now."

Weeks passed and the end of the voyage was near. Only a few days before they landed Juan's plan bore results. Argensola approached him one evening as he stood by the bowsprit gazing sadly into the phosphorescent water thinking of his shattered home.

"Ea, Guerrero?" said Argensola, guardedly.

"Aye."

"I have something to say to you. You and your friend Valera are no sailors. You're both practiced soldiers. Right?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to stay on the ship?"

"No. We want to stay in the Indies."

Juan heard Argensola expel a breath of satisfaction.

"Good. Good. Look you, our troops need men always. All troops in the new world need men. Will you join us?"

Excitement filled Juan, but he kept it from his voice. This troop would be assigned to the governor's castle where Urbino would be! And Alisa! Warmth filled him as he thought of seeing her again, as he remembered her beauty, the motion of her firm breasts as she walked, the feel of her warm flesh under his lips.

"I think so. Yes, Argensola, we'll join you. But the ship? How shall we get away?"

"God's teeth! Rosa would lift my ears if he knew I advised this, but a man must look out for his own. Get a day ashore in Santa Domingo. Come to the castle and ask for me. I'll enroll you in the company, and give you equipment. After that let them search. They'll never find two sailors who have deserted in the uniform of the soldiers of Narvaez. Nor will they look. That I guarantee. Agreed?"

"Aye," said Juan, forcing himself to speak indifferently. "I agree. I'll speak to Valera, but I'm sure he will."

"Good. Understand, when I ignore you, Rosa must not suspect. Farewell for now."

He faded into the darkness leaving Juan with a new feeling of exultation. A short time later Juan went below to seek Valera.

The sea grew bluer, so blue that it was nearly purple. Flying fish shattered the crests of waves into showers of diamonds as they broke from the water into the air. Dolphins escorted them, and whales spouted in the distance. Long gray sharks followed in their wake, and little black birds began to skim close to the wind-wrinkled water. Seaweed made patches of gold bronze in the blue water crisscrossed

and crowned by whitecaps that looked like snow in the shade. A feeling of newness, of unconquered space filled the air.

One night a driving rain sent them from the open deck into the baking forecastle to sleep. They stretched out naked on the hard, verminous bunks and felt the sweat drip from their bodies. Men snored or groaned in their sleep. After more than a month of only four hours' rest at a time, Juan dropped off to sleep immediately.

A hoarse shout rolled them from their bunks, groaning, still half asleep. Trousers were pulled on and cursing men dragged themselves stupidly out on deck. The freshness of the air, exhilarating and cool after the rain, awoke Juan at once. He took his place at the mainsheet. He stood close by the man at the whipstaff who kept his arm and hand on the helm, his eye on the compass and on the leach of the main sail. The stars were bright diamonds overhead. Juan yawned. As he did so, the wind puffed and veered, and suddenly and unmistakably he smelled land—a land of fruits, flowers, rich earth and wood smoke. It was a smell so soft and tender, so eloquent of joys past and joys to come that tears sprang unbidden to his eyes. It was the smell of a new land.

Captain d'Arias ordered his sailing master to make the windward passage, leaving Dominica close on the starboard hand. The next day all aboard crowded to the bulwarks to see the feathery palms, the white beaches and the surf-crowned reefs of the island. The smell of the land was a heady perfume, strong enough to make a man drunk and to fill his soul with strange and burning longings.

A few days later the anchor threw white spray high and the town of Santa Domingo, Spain's capital in the new world, lay fresh in the morning sun. The excited cries of men, the barking of dogs, the shouts of children and the far-off rattle of a drum came out to them across the water.

CHAPTER 10

The suspense was oppressive as the boatswain stood stroking the side of his nose. He looked steadily at Juan and Valera who wore bright scarfs, clean-washed clothing and shoes rubbed shiny with pork fat.

"A run ashore, eh? Well, you didn't wait long after anchoring to make your plea. You, Guerrero, I can understand—a young blade and properly impatient. But you, Valera! Man, you shouldn't be in such haste, the women will keep! Oh well. By heaven, sailors are all alike. Go. You have my permission, and I'll wager my skin that tomorrow or the next day I'll be going ashore to fetch you out of jail."

The sailors in the liberty boat were joyous with the prospect of the shore's delights. They urged the rowers on with taunts, promised to bring them wine, and cursed them for slowness. Juan looked over the side of the boat through the clear water. Below the wrinkled surface he could see the white sand where sea plants waved and fishes darted. Two galleons and half a dozen caravels lay at anchor in the bay. Sea birds gave harsh cries as they soared on white wings. From the towers and walls of the town flags flew, and the sun winked on spear points and armor. Beyond the town were hills blue-green with jungle, and in the sky white clouds floated. The smell of the land grew more pungent as they came to the shore, and the tropic sun was hot on their backs.

The boat landed and eager men took the lines ashore. The stones of the dock burned even through the soles of their shoes. Those who were barefooted leaped like peas on a griddle. The liberty party disappeared quickly into the streets with their beckoning taverns and houses of entertainment.

"Ah!" said Valera. "There's a handsome tavern and we have time. What say you to some fresh food and a bottle of wine?"

The strange fruits would have been delicious even to jaded palates, but to them, after six weeks of salt meat, bread and three pints of stale water a day, these tastes were an ecstasy. Valera swore with delight as little rivers of sweet juice ran down his chin.

"And fresh hot fowl still to come! Splendor of God, life can be good at times!"

"Easy with the wine, Chato. Remember we've got to meet Argensola. We should be sober, and this sun is very hot."

"Hah, Juan Gonzales Guerrero, you worry overmuch. Never fear, all will go well. But I'll insure it. Where's that girl who brought the wine? Damned if I wasn't so engaged with that fruit that I neglected to inspect her properly. Ho, Señorita, over here."

The girl came at once. She was light brown with black eyes. Her body was limp with sorrow, and her eyes were

withdrawn from a world too hard to face. Valera's voice softened when he saw that sadness.

"Another bottle, my poor little one," he said, gently. "And hold yet a moment, Señorita, turn, so. There. Ah, flinch not, girl. Flinch not. I mean you no harm." The girl stood patiently until Valera told her to go.

"See that, Juan?" he fumed. "I merely touched the girl's rump gently and she flinched like a spurred horse and trembled! To hell with men who would so use a poor girl that she is frightened at a little touch of love. But I remember, aye, I remember how the men of Spain behave to these folk. I had hoped for change, but I see there has been none."

"Aye, we're an accursed race, Chato. Well, it's the second hour. We'd better get going. Argensola may come to town if we wait too long."

The sergeant's name got them admitted at the castle gate and a soldier led them to the barracks. They marveled at the massive structure of the castle: many of the stone blocks were enormous.

"How was it ever built, Chato?"

"By blood, lad. An Indian died for every block of stone you see. Here's the barracks, and there's the sergeant. Holà, Argensola. We're here."

"So I see," said Argensola sourly. "Come along. I'll give you your equipment."

The troop's barrack-room was relatively cool because of its thick stone walls. Juan and Valera took their new equipment to the beds assigned them, changed their clothes, and were transformed into soldiers by linen and leather.

The first few days of getting used to their new surroundings left them little time for plans.

"We'll just drift for awhile, El Chato. Ask no questions about Urbino or Montejo. We must arouse no suspicions. Sooner or later we'll hear something of them."

"Good. But can you restrain yourself if you meet Urbino?"

Juan thought grimly of a possible meeting with his parents' murderer. As a private soldier, black-haired and bearded and a dozen years older in appearance, he was not afraid of being recognized. But he was not so sure he could restrain himself in the presence of his enemy.

"Yes, Valera, I can hold in. Look. I'll kill Urbino, but Ill try to save myself at the same time. I find life still worth living, something in this new world makes me glad once more to be alive. I must and I will find a way to kill him and

escape. More, I must try to contrive a way to make him confess, before witnesses, his guilt in destroying my family. I must bring honor again to the name of Moncada."

A few days later Juan fell in with the soldiers behind the corporal of the guard and marched away with them for his turn at sentry duty. At intervals along the walls the guard halted, a man dropped off to take a post, and the man he relieved joined the ranks.

At the fifth the corporal called Juan.

"Guerrero, your post. You cover from this tower to the first gun of that battery. Call if you sight anything unusual. You will be relieved at the fourth hour after noon. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Corporal. One question. Is this courtyard at the right a part of my area?"

"Aye, but only to keep an eye on, or, if the Lord Urbino should desire . . . Watch that pike, you fool! You nearly dropped it. What ails you? The heat? Ah, you damned greenhorns. As I said, the Lord Urbino lives there—with a very handsome wife, I might add—and they walk frequently. Here! You're sick. I'd better have a man relieve you."

"No! I'm all right. Little dizzy, that's all. Too much agua ardiente last night. I'll be all right."

"Be sure you are. Walk your post properly. This Urbino reported a man for sitting down, not long ago, and the lad got two dozen for it. Mind yourself."

Then Juan was alone on the wall, a dozen feet above the inner courtyard. It made a stage upon which he might see the two people in the world who could stir his feelings the deepest, for opposite reasons. But perhaps not such opposite reasons. Love can be close to hate, and Alisa had waited a damned short time after his downfall to marry a man she'd said she'd never have. Juan's face was pale and set as he began to walk his post mechanically.

He couldn't fully rid himself of the hope that perhaps it wasn't Alisa! He remembered the fire in her eyes when she'd said she'd never marry Urbino. Good! Perhaps the dog had failed, perhaps he'd married someone else! Hope and fear alternated as the long hours dragged on.

The castle was built on a rocky eminence overlooking the sea. The wall towered fifty feet above the shore. At its foot was tangled vegetation where birds darted like winged flowers, then below it, grayish sand set with rocks, and finally the sea. It was very calm. The water rolled easily over the sand and rocks, and ran back again like a giant breathing in

contented sleep. Near the shore the clear water was slightly tinged with green under which Juan could see the tide's ripples in the sand. When a fisherman rowed his skiff along the rocks, it looked as if it floated on air instead of water. The water deepened into a darker green to a point fifty yards off shore where it turned deep blue as the bottom fell away. A white sea bird wheeled on wings as slender as a maiden's arms, its forked tail quiveringly alive in the shifting air currents.

The end of his guard duty was approaching but not the end of his suspense. Until he saw Alisa, there was still hope, and he would not sleep again until he knew.

When he looked down into the courtyard once more, he saw a figure in scarlet trunks, doublet and a black plumed hat. It was Urbino! Juan saw the hated face turn in his direction; he saw the red scar he had put on the cheek and the black marks of mustache and goatee. His leg muscles cramped with the hard desire to descend the steps in front of him and slash the life from his enemy. He forced himself to continue his steady pace and he tore his eyes from Urbino only to have them turn to the steps that led to him. Where the top step was chipped a patch of green moss grew. Juan had a perfect photograph of that step. When he wheeled smartly, he saw Urbino sauntering up and down, looking toward the door from which he had come, expectantly. Juan saw Urbino stop, and he saw a flash of color at the door. His legs carried him on though his belly curled with the need to know.

Alisa came out of the door and walked to Urbino's side!

They were fifty feet away, but wind and sea drowned their low voices. Urbino grasped Alisa's arm and turned her half around. She lifted her face for his kiss.

Where am I? What steps are these I'm standing on? Juan thought. His senses returned and he looked dazedly around. He was on the steps leading to the courtyard. Like a man walking in quicksand he forced his legs and feet to take him back up on the wall. Urbino and Alisa hadn't seen him. He glanced at them again and turned sick. He walked the wall in torment while they strolled in the courtyard. After some time they went in through the door, which closed behind them, and the courtyard was as empty as Juan's life.

When Valera saw his friend's face after the relief, he knew something had happened.

"Off duty?" he asked. "Good. Let's go across the plaza. There's good wine there."

They went to the tavern, took a secluded table and drank together. Juan called at once for a second bottle.

"I saw them, Juan Valera. I saw them!"

"Who?"

"Urbino. Don Diego Urbino and his wife . . . his wife . . . his . . . the former Alisa de Montejo."

"Ahh! I'm sorry, Juan."

That was all Valera said of the marriage, then or later, but Juan knew how much he meant. Wine and companionship helped get him through the evening, but when he had to go to the lonely silence of his bed, watch shadows move with time and hear only his sleeping comrades, it was unbearable.

Alisa! came the awful thought, the inevitable thought as he lay in his bed. At this moment she is in bed with Urbino!

He had learned before, in the Santa Casa, how painful a thought could be, but he had partially forgotten that lesson. Now he learned it again. He remembered the too red, full lips of his enemy and the dark hungers and the cruelty in his eyes. Where did those full lips feed now? What sight made those cruel eyes gleam? Juan tortured himself without interruption. He thought of Alisa in Urbino's arms. It was like standing in icy blackness and looking into a warm, lovely room where his enemy lay, joyous and happy, with all the good the world could offer. And Juan was locked out forever.

If he closed his eyes, he saw the room; if he stared through the darkness at the stone overhead, he saw the room. It was a large room with a wide bed. Candles were burning, rugs were spread softly on the floor, and the bed was white. He saw Alisa come in wearing a nightrobe, her red-gold hair hanging down her back. She stood waiting. It was agony to Juan to imagine Urbino's entrance. Juan saw him go to Alisa, saw him kiss her, press her body to his. He stepped back and his full lips smiled as he slowly pulled the robe from her white shoulders, slipped it from her body, revealing her round breasts, her waist, belly, hips and thighs. Juan had never seen Alisa naked, but he saw her now. Urbino's hand, which to Juan seemed visibly red with his parents' blood, crawled over her beauty. Then Urbino picked her up. Her head fell back and her hair made a stream of burnished copper in the candlelight. He put her on the bed. Her head was back, her eyes closed and her breasts compressed softly within themselves by their own weight. Her limbs were wanton. Juan's agony increased until he groaned, and heard

Valera stir. He tried to close his mind's eye, but he could not. He saw Urbino put his lips to Alisa's, then to her throat, then . . . Ah God! thought Juan. Wine! Brandy! A fight—death—and blackness! Forgetfulness come to me now! Don't wait for time's slow passing!

That hour burned away the last trace of his youth, and he, at last, faced the reality of Alisa's loss. He could never go back to the bright hopes of youth again. His beloved belonged to his hated enemy.

A few weeks later a mild stir ran through the troop at the news that Urbino was being sent on a mission to Darien and that twenty of the troop were to go as escorts.

"A lousy pesthole," said Lascado. "Jungles, swamps, fevers, Indians—the rump of the world, my friends. The very insects bite with both ends! Not for me."

Valera was chosen to go but Juan was not. He grew nearly frantic at the prospect of remaining in Santa Domingo while Urbino, Alisa and Valera disappeared over the rim of the world. He pooled his and Valera's entire resources, patted the rump of an Indian girl at Valera's insistence, and got into a dice game. He won gold enough to bribe one of the escort to fall sick at the last moment, and, since he was standing by with equipment ready, he was taken in the sick man's place.

They sailed on a small caravel on a gray, windswept day. The first morning half the twenty were seasick on the 'tween decks where they were quartered. The bad weather held until the last day. All the food was eaten cold because the waves kept the galley fire out. During one lull in the weather, Juan saw Alisa when he went on deck for a lungful of fresh air. She was standing by the taffrail. As he looked at her, she turned and walked toward the companionway. Her face had color from the wind, and her hair was damp around her forehead. Juan met her glance. Hers lingered on him for a moment, then moved on before he could determine whether it really was puzzlement he saw in her eyes. She went by him and disappeared below. Juan shook himself like a dog—or a man—waking up from a dream.

The ship's company was glad to see the mouth of the River Darien, though the blue of the mountains, the thick tangle of the jungle and the sweep of the river made a wild and inhospitable picture. The little town of Santa Maria La Antiqua seemed forlorn on the river's north bank, a hud-

dle of buildings which the crawling jungle would inevitably overwhelm.

"God help me, Juan!" said Valera as they marched from the dock. "I don't like this place."

"Nor I. You can feel danger and sickness in that jungle. It has an ominous smell. I wonder what's beyond those hills?"

The garrison in the town made the newcomers fervently welcome and the Commandant put them on guard duty to rest his own fever-exhausted men. For the first few days his troop saw nothing of Urbino. Valera discovered a tavern on the plaza where the agua ardiente was hot and strong, and he spent a fair portion of his free time there.

"Judas, El Chato, I can't see how you drink that fiery stuff. I'm as hot as hell's furnaces right now and I relish nothing that might make me hotter!" Juan mopped his face and chin with a kerchief, looked at it and swore again. He looked around to see that no one was near. "For the love of God, this dye runs! Look, Valera, the kerchief is black wherever it touches my beard. When we get back to Santa Domingo I'll have something to say to that rascal who sold it to me. He swore that water would never affect it!"

"It looks well enough, Juan," said Valera after a careful inspection. "You must be careful to stay dry, my friend. Come, have a drink. It's surprising, but somehow, the hotter the drink, the cooler you feel. Sit down, amigo."

Juan had little taste for the drink that might dull his caution or rob him of a chance for action now that he was so near his enemy and his former love. He had still less taste for sitting in the squalid tavern and watching others drink, so it happened that, when Argensola hurried into the barracks one afternoon, he found Juan among the dozen men there. Valera was at the tavern.

"Well, lads," said Argensola. "I need six men. Who'll volunteer? Six men for a little expedition up the river with Don Diego. Come now. Who'll go?"

"I'll go, Ramon. And I'm sure Valera will make one of the party."

"Good. You make one, Gonzales. Ah, it seems many are willing. All right, you Pedro, you Manuel and you three. There, we have our six. Too bad for Valera, Gonzales. He has his nose in a bottle. We'll leave it there. All right, lads, out you go to the landing. No armor—swords and daggers will be enough. Out you go. Pedro, take charge."

At the river landing they found the Commandant's launch waiting, manned by six Indian oarsmen. It was equipped with an awning, cushioned seats, baskets of fruit and wine bottles. Four small canoes, each manned by two slaves, were also waiting. One canoe had an awning of thatch over the forward seat. The coxswain of the launch came to meet them.

"You the men from Don Diego's guard? Good. He's going to one of the places where they wash gold from the gravel. It's on a small branch stream a league or so up the river. Its mouth is too shallow for the launch, so Don Diego, the Commandant's aide and two other gentlemen will transfer to the canoes. Four of you are to ride in the canoes to guard the officers and keep the paddlers from taking to the jungle. Keep a sharp watch because they'll be off like birds, given the chance. The other two go in the launch. Hurry. Here comes Don Diego's party now."

Juan was already planning while he listened to this outline of the trip. Here, by God, might be his chance even though his chances were only one in four that he'd be in the canoe with Urbino. No, they were better than that: Urbino was the senior man of the party and would no doubt take the canoe with the awning. Juan caught the eye of its helmsman and motioned to him. A minute later he stepped in and settled himself. At his word the Indians shoved off into the current, paddling just enough to stay level with the dock. The others embarked, and finally Urbino led his party to the dock, climbed aboard the launch with his three companions and the flotilla started up the river.

Juan found that his paddlers spoke and understood a little Spanish.

"You two," he said. "You will do as I say?"

"Yes, Señor, as you say."

Juan's control was wearing thin. The sight of Urbino so near by again brought his anger and his hate to the boiling point. His chest felt tight and hot, and his hand shook when he lifted it. He would kill Urbino! But it would only be a murder without a confession. So be it. He remembered his father under the lash, his mother's disgrace, and Urbino's scornful smile in the torture chamber. Ea! This was the day!

"You men, would you like to be free?"

Their opaque eyes showed no change of expression as they stared at him.

"Yes," said one of them. Both pairs of eyes looked quickly

at the nearby jungle. Juan saw it, and his reply was alive with promise and reassurance.

"Good. Do as I say and I'll see that you reach the jungle. Do you agree?"

They looked at each other, at Juan and then up and down the river. Juan, looking where they looked, for the first time appreciated the scene.

The afternoon sun was still high and the wide river steamed in its heat. The far bank was blue and hazy; the near—they were within fifty feet of it—was clear but mysterious. The massive trees were looped together with tangled masses of creepers and vines. Long gray moss drifted in the wind, bright flowers grew among the tree trunks and a hum of insects came from the dim shadow. Something rustled in the undergrowth; birds cried and were answered from far and near, and a group of gaudy parrots chattered in one wide-spreading tree. It was wild and primeval, and death, freedom and refuge were in its depths. The Indian in the stern met his glance.

"Yes," he said impassively. "Yes, Señor, we agree."

A league up the river the launch drew to a sandbar at the mouth of a small stream. The bar extended below the surface of the water across the stream's mouth, so that the launch could not enter. Here the transfer to the canoes was made. Time stopped for Juan as Urbino stood to look them over.

"You," said Urbino, pointing to Juan, "you, in that boat with the awning. I'll go with you."

The canoe shot alongside the launch, and Urbino climbed awkwardly into it. The awninged seat was in the bow, behind it an Indian, then Juan, then the stern paddler.

"Let the others go first," Urbino said.

"Yes, sir." Juan's voice sounded strange to him. He was beginning to feel a great joy. This was his day; this was the day Urbino died! Juan hadn't killed a man since that night in Urbino's house. He groped back further to remember the feel of a sharp dagger slicing into a squirming human life and he found it—a Moor, killed in battle and unhated. This wouldn't be the same. This would be Urbino! Juan remembered how every move the man had made traveled through the dagger up his arm until Juan had felt the slowing heartbeats throb clear to his shoulder. So it would be. He wondered if Urbino would squeal like a dying pig as he'd heard so many men squeal when steel slashed into their flesh.

The canoes started up the branch stream hugged by the

close-pressing jungle. The eddies were strong near the bank and eased their passage. In a matter of seconds the launch was out of sight, and Juan felt a thousand miles might separate them from it and a thousand years from the town. The smell of the jungle growth and the musky scent of animal life was in the hot air. An island a hundred yards from the stream's mouth cut the stream in two. The leading canoe chose the left branch and the other two followed. Juan quietly told the stern paddle to take the right-hand branch. A trembling eagerness came over him, a happiness like that of a lover who sees his beloved naked before him, ready for his caress.

Now was the time!

Urbino turned in his seat as the foot of the island separated them from the others.

"Where are you going, idiot?" he demanded.

"The helmsman says it's easier water on this side," said Juan. "Look. See, ahead there?"

Urbino looked up the stream. Juan drew out his dagger which seemed alive in his hand, arranged a firm footing and leaned forward. He waited until Urbino turned to speak again—he wanted his enemy to see death approach—then he leaped forward in the canoe, shoving the Indian paddler aside with one hand. Urbino saw him coming, saw death and hate in the face of his guard, and screamed like a woman. Juan felt the Indian's hot flesh under his arm, saw Urbino's thin mouth open wide, and heard the world split by his scream. At that instant, the canoe lurched and tipped, the paddlers missed a stroke, the current caught the canoe and it hit a snag. With one hand almost on his enemy, Juan felt the canoe spin over on its side, heard Urbino's cry stop abruptly and felt the water close over his head.

He gasped with shock and disappointment, and his lungs filled with water. He felt the current tearing at him. Darkness was around him and a weight was on his chest. He felt the bottom, felt himself dragged along it, felt himself rise. The sunlight dazzled him for a moment. His clothing, his heavy boots and the current pulled him under once more. He lost his sword, but worst of all he had lost his golden chance at revenge. It was his life now that would be taken. Even in the water Juan seemed to feel his tears of failure. The dagger clenched in his hand was unfleshed. It would never be. He dropped it and rose to the surface once more. He heard shouts. Half-strangled he went under until his young body reasserted itself and he swam to the surface

again. Someone grasped his hair, pulled him upward and hands caught his shoulders. As he was dragged from the water he fell to the sand and vomited. Then he found himself held by two men at the edge of the sand bar.

"In the name of ten thousand flaming devils!" said Pedro who had remained to guard the launch and the wine bottles. "Ea, Martin! You have Don Diego? Good!"

Juan could see into the launch where Urbino was stretched out, coughing and gasping. Urbino looked up and saw Juan.

"Hold him!" he shouted. "Hold him. He's a murderer! He tried to kill me. Let him escape and you die!"

Juan struggled vainly to escape the clutching hands. The other canoes returned, and Juan was surrounded by armed men. His stomach righted itself but his legs felt weak. His arms were tied behind his back. He looked down at his doublet, saw it stained black, remembered the treacherous dye and groaned.

"For the love of God!" he heard someone say. "Look at Guerrero. He's a blond! Thundering devils, what can it mean?"

"Tie him fast," said Urbino shakily. "We will return to the fort."

The trip back seemed short to Juan when he thought that an hour would probably see him torn on the rack. As he was led into the fort, the memory of his father helped him hold his head high.

"What's all this?" demanded Vasco de Balboa, the Commandant.

"This madman tried to kill me," said Urbino. "As yet I know not why. But I shall."

"Tried to kill you? Mother of God, but why? You!" He turned to Juan. "What have you to say to this?"

Juan gathered his wits for a last gamble with fate.

"Your Excellency, Don Diego is mistaken, I swear it. The paddler took the right-hand side of the island. I asked him why and he said the water was better. When I looked forward again, the Indian between myself and Don Diego was crawling toward him with a knife in his hand. I leaped forward to try to prevent murder. Don Diego turned, saw me and thought I meant to kill him. Then the canoe tipped over and the next thing I knew I was pulled from the water at the mouth of the small stream. There, your Excellency, that's what really happened. I swear it!"

Balboa's face cleared somewhat, and he stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"Where are the slaves from the canoe?" he asked.

"Gone to the jungle, Excellency. They took the opportunity to escape," answered his aide.

"Ah. I see. Well, Don Diego, it seems likely that you were mistaken. Indeed, I feel sure you were. Why should a Spanish soldier, a member of your own guard, suddenly try to kill you?"

Urbino scowled.

"No, Excellency, no. It's a good story he's concocted, but I saw. He was past the slave, almost upon me, when the canoe overturned!"

"Why should he want to kill you?"

Urbino stepped close to Juan and stared into his face.

"I think I know, Excellency. I think I know." Juan saw the growing suspicion in his face, suspicion and the beginnings of exultation. "I'm not quite sure. The dog is familiar somehow now that his hair and beard are their natural yellow. But I'll know soon. Summon the Lady Urbino at once."

Suspense slowed the movement of time for Juan. He had a fighting chance now. If Alisa failed to recognize him, or refused to betray him if she did, the Commandant would probably order him released. Balboa's manner showed no liking for Urbino, and with a sufficiently good excuse he would probably cross Urbino. If the worst happened, Juan had at least the comfort of knowing that Valera was clear. He thanked God Valera had been tippling when the expedition was organized.

Alisa came into the room. She was in light blue. Her face was pale and her questioning eyes went first to Urbino. Juan saw all her beauty of body and face, but it held a different, more remote quality, something that couldn't really touch a man as close to death as he stood. She followed Urbino's pointing finger and looked into Juan's face.

Juan saw her eyes widen with shock, her hands go to her mouth and her red lips open.

"Kind God," he prayed to himself, "let her not betray me! She knows me, she knows me, but surely, even past love will keep her silent. Your wits, Alisa, use your wits!"

His lips didn't move, his face didn't change even when the words he had tried to pray away fell into the quiet room.

"Juan!" he heard her cry. "Juan de Moncada! What are you . . . Then it *was* you on the ship that day. I thought

. . . What . . . Don Diego, are you . . ." Her voice stopped, he saw her flush, grow pale and flush again.

He felt bitterness sweep through him. She had condemned him. He looked at her, met her eyes.

"Thank you, my Lady Urbino," he said, harshly.

Her eyes widened and she paled again, whiter this time. Afterwards he tried to convince himself that it was only at that moment she realized what she had done.

"Juan! Oh, Mother Mary! What have I . . . ? Don Diego, Don Diego, let me go! Oh, my lord, my lord, I pray you, don't . . ."

"Escort my lady back to her quarters," ordered Urbino, satisfaction in his voice.

Juan saw two men take Alisa away. For the last time I see her, he thought to himself. The door closed, and she was gone.

"That makes everything perfectly clear, your Excellency," Urbino said. "This man is a condemned heretic. I brought him to punishment in Seville. He has disguised himself and followed me to get his revenge. There can be no question that he tried to kill me."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure. Did you not see the blond hair and beard which had been dyed black? Heard you not my wife?"

"A man might have many reasons for a disguise," persisted Balboa. "You yourself were not sure. Have you no further proof?"

Urbino frowned, then his face cleared.

"Aye, I remember now. When Moncada was whipped in Seville I noticed a scar on his left breast. It was a vivid red and shaped like a star. Strip this man. On his left breast you'll find that scar and on his back the stripes of the whip."

Juan's doublet and shirt were torn off, revealing the scar and the criss-cross marks of the lash. The Commandant's face darkened.

"What have you to say, Guerrero? Your life is at stake."

"Only this: I received that scar from the bolt of a Moorish crossbowman when helping recapture a galleon of Spain from the Mahounds. I fought for Spain and the church. Let Urbino show his scars. But he has none, except perhaps those of the pox. They mark his only battles!"

Balboa's eyes were fixed on Juan's. He was an old soldier, and Juan saw regret in his look even as he shrugged and turned to his aide.

"Put this man in double irons in prison. Guard him night and day."

"What do you intend with the villain?" asked Urbino. "He has already been condemned and could be burned without further questioning. My wife and I would be most pleased to witness it!"

Urbino's cold eyes and twisted smile were the last things Juan saw as he was taken roughly through the door.

The irons burned Juan's wrists and ankles as they were welded fast. They were designed to remain in place until his charred body should be taken from a blackened stake here or in Santa Domingo some day.

He was taken to a dark kennel of stone and left to silence, bitter thoughts and fear. He didn't know how many days passed, but his beard had grown only a little when guards opened the door, ordered him to his feet and marched him from the gaol. He was weak with suspense until they turned toward the harbor instead of the parade ground where executions took place.

A caravel was at the dock. Juan saw the name on her stern as he was marched between rows of spectators: *Gracias a Dios.* He was held tight as he crossed the gangplank to keep him from cheating the stake by plunging into the sea.

Juan was led to a hatchway and pushed inside. Before the sunlight was blocked out he saw a sight which lessened his despair but added a new fear—the fear that a loved friend might give his life for him. Across the ship, dressed in the loose clothing of a sailor, barefooted, clean-shaven, watchful, was Juan Valera! Their eyes met, but neither gave any sign of recognition.

They took Juan down to the bilges, stapled the chain between his ankles to a slimy board and left him to darkness, smells and rats. Not long after, the sounds on deck and the motion of the ship told him they were under way.

CHAPTER 11

Only Juan's leg irons were fastened, but he was forced to sit or lie down because there was only three feet of clearance. The bilge stench was strong, rats squeaked and the heat was oppressive. The blackness was relieved by the sen-

try's lantern which let in the light above the ill-fitting door. As the ship rolled, the lantern swung and a bar of light moved across Juan's prison, touching on dank timbers and greasy waters. Juan could dimly see his chains and the eyes of waiting rats, pairs of shining pinpoints.

He was fed bread and water three times a day, and by those breaks he measured time. On the second day a visitor came, and the sound of a human voice was welcome, especially since the guard who brought his food never uttered a word.

"I am Geronimo Aguilar, my son," announced the visitor. "I have come to talk to you."

The strong light dazzled Juan, but as he became used to it he saw that the man wore a robe. His voice and manner had, however, already betrayed the priest.

"I accompany Don Ramon Valdivia, and I have come to offer you solace and hope, my son. Repent while there is time. Cleanse yourself of sins, of blasphemies, of heresies. You must burn on earth, take care that it be not for eternity!"

Juan found again the difference between knowledge and certainty. It was one thing to know he would die at the stake, and quite another to have a man tell him so in a voice of sorrowful finality. He felt dizzy and sick; he did not hear part of what the priest was saying. Then a rush of anger came to help him, and he wiped the cold sweat from his face, made himself listen and watch the long, narrow face of the priest whose cheek hollows and eye sockets were black pools of shadow in the light of the lantern.

". . . and therefore do I, the most humble of God's servants, ask you to recant your blasphemies, to repent your sins and to join your prayers with mine for God's forgiveness. What say you, my son?"

Juan checked his laugh before it grew shrill with his rising hysteria.

"Solace! Comfort! A fine comfort you bring, Señor Aguilar. Go. Leave me to the rats. They wait for my bones silently; they won't cook me while I'm still alive. They leave that to Christians. No, I will not whine now that I'm caught; I won't cry like a thief taken in the market place. I have done no wrong. Go!"

"So be it, my son," said the priest, sadly. "I would do anything for you that I can. Since I cannot save your life, I would save your soul. I will pray for you; perhaps light will come."

When he had gone the blackness seemed more intense. The shifting spear of light swung endlessly over the moving water and the wet planks.

Juan lost count of time. He knew that a long time had passed, but he did not know how long. A rat ran over his leg. As he flung it aside, his hand dropped on a little pile of hard bread. There were five pieces. So for five meals, at least, he had been insensible, not unconscious, but lost in memories—memories of his mother and of his father, of battles, of Spain and, always, memories of Alisa and Urbino.

There was a constant murmuring noise in the bilges: the squeal of rats, the vibrations of footsteps on the deck above, the wash of waves and the song of wind in the rigging carried through chains and timber clear down to the bottom of the ship. These noises were so constant that Juan listened only for new sounds. Suddenly he heard one—a loud, bluff voice whose tone brought Juan fully alive. It was Valera's.

"Aye, the boatswain told me to check the water in the bilges. It has been rough and he fears some planking may have sprung. Let me in, soldier. Damn this job; it'll be days before the stench of the place will leave me!"

The door opened, light filled the bilges, and the rats fled. A figure crawled through the low entrance toward Juan.

"Juan, Juan?" Valera called in a low voice.

"El Chato! Juan Valera! Here, oh here!"

Valera's hard hand felt warm and full of encouragement. His affectionate embrace Juan would never forget.

"Old friend, what are you doing here?"

"Hush. Softly. Let me speak; I must be quick. Don't give up hope. I have a plan. Listen. Tomorrow night we run close to shoals. I've seen the chart. I have the helm until midnight, and I'll bring us close to the shoals before my watch ends—my dagger inside the compass stand will do it. We should be among them soon after midnight and almost surely we'll run aground. In the turmoil I'll come down here with a sledge-hammer. I'll loose you, and we'll steal the gig and leave the ship. We can make the mainland and take to the jungle. A bad life, perhaps, but better than burning. If we drown, so be it. That, too, is better."

"No, Valera, my good Valera, I'll not cause your death. No!"

"Beelzebub's bells, Juan! We'll not drown. I've been told often that I was born for a different fate. Look, Juan, this is a new land. Island men say there are golden cities and beautiful women with white skin. You and I will go and see. Pray

to the saints for good fortune tomorrow night. With God, Juan."

A moment later Juan heard him shouting to the guard.

"God help me! What a foul place! Ea, soldier, I think your prisoner is mad. He babbles of orange blossoms. Orange blossoms, mind you! Ah, now for some good air. Farewell."

The night was remorselessly long for Juan. From breakfast to dinner was an unbearable twelve hours. Juan felt he had grown old in that time.

After the third meal, Juan tried to keep careful track of the time.

"Four more hours, four more hours, four more hours," he would repeat constantly. Finally, the sounds on deck told him it was the midnight watch. Suspense held Juan in its iron claws. He could feel the ship rolling over rough waves. At each pitch the timbers groaned, and the bilge water sloshed.

Juan was sure that Valera's plan had been discovered. It was a long time since midnight. The noise he had heard had probably not been the changing of the watch. Valera was probably in chains; perhaps he was already dead! Juan lost all hope. The compass error undoubtedly gave the plan away. That was it. Juan's despair was blacker than ever. He cursed God as he tore at his chains.

Then, from two decks above him, Juan heard a shout. Feet pounded and the ship heeled over as she tacked. She held that course for only a moment or two, then tacked again. The bilge water rushed first close to Juan's feet, then poured away as the ship rolled over to the other tack. There were more shouts from overhead.

Then the planking under Juan hit ground, growled and came free. The ship lurched, and something heavy dropped on the deck. Men shouted and the ship stopped! Juan was thrown off balance. The ship moved again, heeled, then started a quick and senseless roll as she came into the wind, all sheets loosed, sails thundering so loudly that even in the bilge Juan heard them.

"Body of God!" Juan heard the guard shout. "A reef! The ship's sinking! I'm not going to drown down here. To hell with the sergeant!"

Juan heard the clatter of a pike on the deck and the sound of boots on the ladder. The ship heeled way over to larboard as the wind pushed her against the reef. There was a dull sound when wave after wave dropped her. She was knocking herself to pieces. Juan could smell the clean smell

of fresh sea water and he blessed the God he had cursed a moment ago that she had heeled to larboard. He would otherwise be waist-deep in water.

The door burst open and Valera scuttled across to Juan carrying a lantern.

"Juan! Quick. God! I thought I'd ground her on a sand bar and she'd shortly get off and sail on. Now she's sinking! Quick, take the axe!"

The deck was so far tilted that it was hard to work. Juan shoved the axe under the chain at his feet and Valera swung the heavy sledge-hammer. The chain broke. Valera broke the chain on his arms in two places, leaving Juan with six inches of chain at each wrist.

"May have to swim for it!" said Valera. "Once more; we must get part of that chain from your leg. Move the axe a little. Curse the water. I can't see. Hold steady. Missed! Again. There. Come. Out! Out!"

Juan was through the door ahead of Valera. His legs felt weak on the ladder but he hurried out into the confusion on deck. Even while he struggled against the wind and clutched the rigging when water rushed to his knees, he inhaled the freshness of the air with a sob of gratitude. A half gale was blowing and men worked frantically to launch the boats. The quarter lanterns gave a dim light and the ship was outlined in a phosphorescent green fire. Two lanterns swung in excited hands on the deck between the two boats, and shouts and orders competed with the din of the sea.

"Ready now, hoist all together. Lay into it. Watch it, Pedro! Fend off, fend off. There. Into her, lads."

One boat was in the water. Men leaped into it, tumbling over the thwarts. A wave smashed it against the ship's side.

"Shove off, shove off, for God's sake! Hurry before we're stove in! Shove off!" someone yelled.

The boat pulled away from the ship and disappeared in the darkness.

"Here's the other boat, Juan. Into it!" Valera called.

They groped and slid across the steep deck. Juan joined the men at the falls and heaved at the command. The boat swung free and into the water. Men climbed in. Valera took Juan's arm just as somebody shoved him. Juan's foot slipped on the bulwark, a wave washed along between boat and ship and he was half submerged and choking. Valera pulled him by the shoulder. Finally he got a foot on the gunwale of the boat, shoved free of the ship, fell across a thwart and felt someone land on top of him.

"Juan! Juan!" he heard Valera shout.

"Here, El Chato. I'm all right."

"Good! Thank God."

Of the fighting mass of men in the boat several managed to reach the oars, Valera and Juan among them, and the boat was pulled away from the ship just as she heeled further over and a large wave washed over her bow. The bow never rose again. The forecastle light was blotted out. Even in the darkness, the white foam of the waves, where they beat against the ship, was visible. The cabin lights vanished, and last of all, the quarter lanterns, poised for a moment above the water, blinked out. A wide patch of bubbling phosphorescence was all that remained of the ship.

For a few minutes it seemed doubtful that the boat would work clear. Spray dashed into Juan's face and his strength began to leave him but he tugged at the oar unceasingly. He could see nothing. A clear, sharp voice astern counted the strokes and kept the oars together. Little by little the boat gained headway. Men dared hope. They bailed the boat with caps, hands and buckets. Lightened, the boat shook free of danger and moved out into the starless night.

A crossfire of curses shot over the boat. Men's bodies touched those of other wet and frightened men. Juan, however, could almost have laughed aloud. He inhaled the sweet air, stretched his free arms wide and ignored the curses of his neighbors. Death, yes. He'd seen its face before. But not by the stake. Not by the stake!

When they were relieved from the oars, Juan and Valera sat together. Juan took Valera's hand.

"There is no one like you, my friend," he said.

Valera patted his arm.

"I would do even more for you, Juan," he answered guardedly. "But, God, I didn't mean this! Men have died because of my mistake tonight. I didn't think the ship would be lost. But I'll think no more of it. I'd do it again to save you from the stake. God knows I meant these men no harm, but most would die worse deaths. Drowning's easy when all's said."

Juan tried to comfort Valera, but there was little he could say except his thanks.

The rising sun brought courage, and cramped muscles relaxed a little in the warmth. The wind had died down. Valdivia, the commander, was in the stern with Aguilar and the boatswain. Juan was just in front of him. He saw Valdivia's look of dismay as he counted the stores.

"God above! Five gallons of water and one sack of bread for nineteen men. Short rations, friends. With no mast or sail, we can't say how long we'll be at sea."

Valdivia looked up and saw Juan. He started in surprise. "You here? How was that managed?"

"I loosed him, Excellency," answered Valera.

"So?" Valdivia's glance hardened for a moment. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "Ah well, it was right. I would not have a man die chained to a sinking ship."

Juan looked down at the heavy steel cuffs which were welded fast around his wrists and ankles. A few inches of chain hung from each wrist and ankle. Juan laughed at their clanking. He turned to Aguilar.

"Geronimo Aguilar. It would seem that the church is wrong in my case. I think I'm not intended to die at the stake. Somehow I think we'll never see Santa Domingo."

"The will of God is inscrutable, my son," answered the priest. "It may be that He does not intend you to burn. Bless His name, my son."

"He took a damned inconsiderate way to prevent it then," said a burly sailor. "I have half a mind to roll you over the side, Guerrero!"

"Peace there," said Valdivia. "We have enough to fight without squabbling."

Wind and current bore them to the unknown northwest where no ships sailed. Supplies were rationed. Each man received a mere swallow of water at sundown. Thirst soon became a torment under the burning sun.

On the eighth day two men died from drinking salt water, and only a heavy rain squall on the ninth saved the rest. Besides having their fill, they caught and stored water. But when that water was gone, and thirst returned, each day was an eternity. Maddened by thirst, men went overboard in the night. They grew weak, dreaming not of food but of water. Slowly life died within them all. Only an occasional rain squall kept them alive.

For the fourteenth time since the sinking of the Gracias, the sun rose. Juan dragged himself to a sitting position and looked about him. The others lay unmoving. He looked at the blood-red sun, then away from its light to the cool west.

There, plain before his eyes, was a white strip of beach with the dark green jungle beyond. The others staggered to their knees or feet at his croaking cry.

"Land! Land! My God, it's land!"

Those reserves of strength which hope unleashes helped

them get the oars and row the boat against a current which was carrying them parallel to the beach. There was more room in the boat now, for only twelve men remained. Slowly they worked the boat toward land, and they could make out a high, white pyramid above the trees, crowned by some sort of building. When they were finally close enough to the beach to hear the surf, they could no longer see the pyramid. It was noon when the bow of the launch grated on the sand, but they were too weak to walk ashore.

Within minutes a group of men waded alongside the boat. Their white breechcloths dragged in the water as they gently lifted the Spaniards and carried them ashore.

These hosts of the Spaniards were short, strongly built men with deeply bronzed skin. Their hair was black or dark brown, worn long, braided, and curled around their well-shaped heads like a flat crown. Eyes were black or brown or hazel. They wore only one garment, a long, narrow strip of clean white cloth wound around the waist several times, then pulled between the legs and looped through the other fold at the back to hang all the way around just below the knee. They wore rough, sturdy-looking sandals looped to the feet with an intricate lashing of cords. They carried no weapons. Their faces were cheerful, kindly and intelligent, their movements quick and energetic.

They brought water to the Spaniards. They brought fruit, and lumps of a dough-like substance which they mixed with water in cups made of half-gourds. The mixture looked like milk and greatly strengthened the starving Spaniards. The food, the water, the kindness, the shade and, above all, the blessed relief revived them. Still too weak to stand, they lay in the shade and slept beneath the watchful eyes of their rescuers.

When Juan awoke, the sun had left the beach and was out of sight behind the wall of jungle. Just as a shadow had fallen on the beach, so a feeling of menace had gradually supplanted the first relief of rescue. Danger was near. Juan looked up to his left, stared, then rose shakily to his feet to wake his companions.

A group of these bronzed people faced him. In front of them stood a smaller number of men, but their demeanor and dress announced them to be of a quite different station.

In front of them all stood a man of middle height and great breadth of shoulder. His scarred face was hard and impassive. His breechcloth, which reached halfway to his knees, was of brilliant colors, and his sandals were orna-

mented with feathers and gold. The head of a spotted animal was fitted to his head, helmet fashion. Broad bands of yellow and green crossed his chest horizontally, and he wore a featherwork cloak of the same colors. There were weapons in his ornate girdle, and he bore a feather-tufted spear in his right hand. He was staring at Juan and his companions with a stony coldness, and his look was full of menace.

CHAPTER 12

Juan licked his lips and looked beside him at Valera who was rubbing his nose thoughtfully. Aguilar appeared excited but not frightened. The others stared at the men, facing them the way birds stare at a snake. Food, water and rest had made them interested in survival once more.

"By my faith!" murmured Valera. "Here's a gay bird."

The man in the feathered cloak stepped forward.

"Co-ox," he said.

The soldiers stepped forward and surrounded the Spaniards without touching them. They wore the white breechcloths which were the mark of the laborers, but their chests were painted green and yellow and they carried spears, bows and arrows and throwing sticks. Juan noticed a knifehandle in each belt and the hilt of what appeared to be a sword, or, in some instances, a carved club.

The officer addressed Aguilar, distinguished by his tattered robes, and spoke in a musical language that reminded Juan of Arabic. Aguilar answered in Spanish.

"We are shipwrecked unfortunates, noble sir. Will you help us return to our homes?"

Blank stares answered him. Mendez Pidal, one of the sailors, repeated the question in the language of the Carib Indians but again received no answer. Finally, the man in the feathered cloak made a long-armed, graceful gesture. He pointed to the white men, to the ocean and then to the east. He walked a few quick steps as if traveling, then turned to the Spaniards with eyebrows raised. Mendez Pidal gave a cry.

"The gaudy dog wants to know if we come from the East! They have heard of us. Good! He won't dare harm us now. Ha, lads! We'll be back in Santa Domingo soon, I'll warrant,

and these dogs look as if they'd make sturdy slaves. Tell him 'yes,' good father."

Aguilar repeated the gestures, then nodded his head several times. Instantly, the man's hostility turned to hatred. He spoke: "Likinob!"

Immediately his soldiers lifted their spears and stepped closer, eyes on their leader who shook his head.

"Ppencatob. Ek Chuah."

At these words the soldiers began tearing the clothes off the Spaniards. Knives of sharp obsidian came from their belts and ripped through doublets and jerkins. They tried to remove Juan's irons, were unconcerned at failure and left them in place. They were the only possession left to the white men, who felt doubly helpless at being naked.

The officer turned and the soldiers lined up on both sides of the line of Spaniards whom they prodded into the path. And now, even the laborers' faces showed hatred instead of friendliness.

"God above!" said Juan. "It would seem that these people know all about our treatment of the island folk. You spoke of slaves, Pidal. I'll wager these men are different from the Indians of Santa Domingo."

Strange flowers bloomed by the path along which they walked; colorful birds flitted and squawked in the trees. The green jungle shut out the sky until the path skirted a field of corn. The tasseled cornstalks were high and strong. Occasionally, they passed clusters of huts always near a pool at the bottom of a hollow. The huts were made of woven cane and white stucco mixed, with thatched roofs and little flower gardens around them. Women sat in the yards talking and children seemed to be playing everywhere. At the word "Likinob" expressions of interest changed to scowls.

The path ran through thick jungle so close to the ocean that they could hear but not see it. The effect was rather like walking through a tunnel except for an occasional dusty gold spear of sunshine which pierced the tangled roof. One such ray lighted a strange, pale purple mass of blooms. Suddenly, they walked into the open sunshine.

Every Spaniard stopped in astonishment.

"Holy Mary!"

"Where are we?"

"By St. James, saw you ever the like?"

The jungle from which they had come was one side of a large, stone plaza. Massive one-storied buildings of gleaming stone and stucco were on the other three sides. Their fronts

blazed with color and were decorated with carved faces and grotesque monsters. Carved and painted colonnades crossed the square. Banners streamed from staffs. But the center of the picture, the cynosure of all eyes, was a pyramid acres wide at the bottom and enormously high in the air. At intervals up its impressive height, it was painted in bright colors and richly carved; the rest was a dazzling white.

A broad stairway led the eye to the top of the pyramid where the pillars of a superstructure could be seen from which a column of smoke was rising. From here a chant drifted faintly down on the wind. Beyond the pyramid, outside the plaza, were two similar structures, each with its plume of smoke and flying banners.

The guards roused the Spaniards, who stood dumb before this beauty, and they resumed their march. Almost as soon as their bare feet touched the smooth stone, excited crowds surrounded them, many of them handsome women. Valera cringed, blushed and complained.

"Good God, what a reception! They might have left us at least a rag of clothing. What shameless creatures these wenches are! Look at her, pointing at me. Shame on you, wench! Saw you never a man before?"

"Not one like you, Chato," Juan said, grinning.

He felt little fear, only interest and a considerable share of Valera's modesty.

The pressing crowd scowled when the guards explained who these white men were, but they made no move to harm them. The prisoners passed a market place where thatched roofs on bamboo supports protected all kinds of merchandise from sun and rain. There were fruits of many varieties, and wild game, including turkeys, peccaries, deer, partridges and a bird resembling the pheasant. Other booths contained cloth, colored as well as white, food, images, pots, pans, clothing—everything, in short, required for life in a well-developed civilization. The Spaniards marched from there through a colonnade leading to one of the low buildings. They saw a high, wide doorway guarded by the statues of two men with tall feather headdresses: one had a long, hooked nose and benign features; the other was an old man supporting himself with dignity on an elaborately carved staff.

Their destination was a series of cagelike structures on one side of the plaza. The backs and sides of the cages were of dressed stone; the fronts were open except for closely spaced wooden bars. Some cages held animals; others, naked

men. At the largest empty cage a small, grooved door was slid upward, and the Spaniards were forced to their knees and on through the opening. When the last Spaniard had entered, the door was closed with a thud and fastened. Juan stood erect, grabbed two bars in his hands and found that they would not give to his strongest pull. They were of the ironwood he had seen in Santa Domingo. He turned to the others who huddled on the grass spread over the stone floor.

"Better than the Inquisition's *murus secretus,* Señor Aguilar. I think these folks are kinder than Mother Church. At least they allow the condemned light and air, and I wager we won't go hungry. This I know well: I'd rather be here than in a Christian dungeon."

"Perhaps, son Guerrero, perhaps. But you must remember that the church does as she does for the sake of the soul. It is in kindness that she acts."

"Kindness? Like my old grandfather! I saw the native. chief, Hatuey, burned alive in the plaza with all his family—even his five-year-old child. I remember that Hatuey said at the stake that he wouldn't become a Christian, because he didn't want to meet again, not even in heaven, people so cruel! Kindness!"

Aguilar sighed, his lean face sad.

"Perhaps you are right, my son. There are many in the church who feel that the Indians are cruelly mistreated. There is Las Casas. He is a Dominican, and he has done all that man can do to try to lighten the fate of the folk of the islands."

"Aye," said Juan. "Aye. Las Casas is a man indeed, and a priest indeed. He has earned his name as 'Protector of the Indians.' I tell you, Aguilar, had you more like him in the church, I could readily forget my quarrel with you."

"Cease blaspheming, heretic," scowled Pidal. "Such talk brings ill fortune. We should rather be at prayers. I doubt if these Indian dogs keep us here merely as part of a zoo."

This roused Captain Valdivia from his gloomy silence.

"Enough from all of you. We must work together for salvation, not fight among ourselves. At least we have a priest. Each of us can die absolved like a Christian gentleman. I pray you, Fra Aguilar, will you hear confessions?"

"Gladly, Captain Valdivia. It's the best thing we could do. Son Guerrero, you, too, must join. If you are to die, die a Christian."

So the ceremony was held and at least true humility and

repentence were present. Juan took part, though he refused to repent the accusations made by the Inquisition.

Night fell and nearby torches, standing in holders made to look like stocky little men, were lighted. The glow of the fire from the pyramid top was orange-red, and the chant continued. A drum beat somewhere in a distant part of the town, and barking dogs swelled the chorus of the night. It was an eerie scene to see and to hear. Most of the white men sat together at the back of the cage to talk of familiar things.

"Ho, lads," Juan interrupted them. "Here come our hosts again. With food, too. Yes, they're opening the door."

The open door was inviting but impossible to use, since only one man could get through it at a time, and he would be helpless on his knees with his head down. Food and water were shoved through the door, which was then closed, and the soldiers went away.

"Fruit, boys," said Valera. "Fruit, and yes, by God! meat, warm meat. And beans like those of the islands and corn bread. All we need is wine, but I'm afraid these folk don't know that blessing of God. Fall to, lads. I'm hungry."

The food was good and well cooked, and their spirits rose as their hunger was properly satisfied for the first time in many days. As they were finishing, they saw torches leading a kind of procession.

"Ea, Juan," said Valera. "Something up. I can feel it here." He touched his belly lightly.

The procession stopped in front of their cage. Bearers set a brilliant palanquin on the stones before it. The man who stepped out wore a green feather cloak and a panache of green plumes on his head. His bare chest was painted in the familiar green and yellow and his sandals flashed golden in the torchlight. On his left was the officer who had captured the Spaniards; on his right a tall man painted blue, wearing blue sandals, a blue cloak and a high-peaked blue headdress. The three looked intently at the white men and conferred among themselves while the waiting Spaniards found their palms grow moist and their bellies go cold with sudden fear. Then the green-plumed man stepped into his palanquin and was borne away. The torches were extinguished, so that once again only the flicker of the fire on top of the big pyramid pierced the darkness.

After the long, strange, nearly sleepless night, dawn was ushered in with the smell of wood smoke, bird song and a new chant from the pyramid. Soon after sunrise a multi-

tude assembled in the plaza, many to look at the Spaniards. In addition to loincloths and sandals, the men now wore long white cloaks over the shoulders, knotted around the neck. The women wore a garment made of two long strips of cloth sewn together at one end, with a square hole for the head. This garment was colorfully embroidered, especially at the neck and hem. It was open at the sides but held together by a belt at the waist. Some of the women wore an undergarment from waist to knee, and they all wore or carried brightly colored scarfs. They were as a group unusually comely and intelligent-looking. Their tan had the golden quality of sunburn. Their carriage was good; their figures, on the whole, graceful and attractive.

"By my faith, gentlemen," said Valera, "will you look at these damsels outside our door!"

The Spaniards stared at some palanquins which had just arrived. The chairs were set on the stone but the occupants didn't alight. Instead, they peered with interest through curtains which were drawn aside.

"By God!" said Pidal. "But they have light skins. Strange!"

"I've seen ladies as dark as the one in blue at the court in Madrid," said Valdivia. "Can this indeed be India? Perhaps Columbus was right, after all."

The court ladies stayed only a short while. The bearers lifted the shafts and the crowd stood back out of respect for nobility. They moved again to the bars when the chairs had disappeared.

But the business of the day started soon, and the crowd outside the cage gradually moved to the base of the pyramid. Curls of smoke rose from braziers at various spots on the plaza and a sweet smell drifted into the cell. A second chant from the distance grew louder as a formal procession approached the cage.

The blue man of the night before was in the lead. With him were four old men, naked and painted blue from hair to toe. A file of soldiers as well as feathered and brightly robed men followed. They all stopped before the cage.

"My friends," said Aguilar quietly. "This is the time. Whatever happens, conduct yourselves like Christians. May the blessing of God be with you all."

"Amen," came the devout response in a chorus.

The small door was raised, and the soldiers beckoned the prisoners to come out. Valdivia shrugged his shoulders, dropped to his knees and crawled through with Pidal after him. The rest followed in no special order, for they were all

going wherever it was. However, when the fifth man had crawled out, the door was dropped and barred. Those left in the cage watched as their comrades were marched off, two soldiers in front and two behind each man, their spears leveled, ready for use.

Now a strange cacophony arose—the moaning of conch shells, the shrilling of whistles, the clacking of horn on bone and the weird, winding airs on some sort of flute. The procession started up the stairway of the pyramid, spear points twinkling and brilliant bodies glowing in the sun.

Aguilar relapsed into a steady prayer for the souls of his comrades. The procession flowed over the top of the pyramid out of the caged prisoners' sight. All sound stopped for a few minutes. Then a low chant, rhythmic and moving, began. It grew louder and faster and deeply ominous. Juan found it beat in time with the pounding of his heart. It reached a frenzied pitch and swelled into a roar when the mass of people below in the plaza joined in the words. It ended with one last shout. The silence which followed was awesome. A moment later a twisting object hurtled from the top of the pyramid into the courtyard below. It was a human body!

Four times more, the chant began low, swelled to a roar, and stopped abruptly on a savage accent of triumph. Juan had watched the smoke trail each time; it hadn't changed at all. He was sure then that fire had no part in the sacrifice.

At last the chant was replaced by livelier music. Songs, shouts and laughter could be heard by the frightened prisoners. It soon became evident that drinking was a part of the celebration. By midafternoon some of the Maya were drunk. They staggered around the plaza, laughing, shouting, making love. Once more soldiers brought food to the prisoners. Valera picked up one of the gourds of liquid, tasted it and gave a yelp of delight.

"Wine, lads, and good wine, too! I retract what I said about the barbarity of these folk. Ah! Taste it, Gonzales!"

Juan tried the golden wine cautiously. It tasted of honey and wood and went down the throat easily, leaving a tingle behind. The Spaniards welcomed its relaxing effect after the strain of the day.

By nightfall the celebration was over. The plaza slept quietly, protected by the flickering flames of the eternal fire on the top of the pyramids.

The next few days passed uneventfully. The guards seemed friendly and willing to talk. Juan learned a few words of the

language: wine—xtabentn, gourd—lec, soldier—tupile, Indian—Maya. Not enough for conversation but a beginning and a useful way to occupy the mind.

One morning while talking, or rather gesturing, to one of the guards, Juan tried to find out what was to happen to them. He pointed to himself, to the pyramid, and raised his eyebrows. The man laughed. Then he pointed to Juan, drew an imaginary knife from his belt, stabbed himself in the chest with it, died in pantomime, pointed to the sun and held up seven fingers.

Juan gave the news to the others at once.

"Gentlemen, this man has just informed me that in seven days we join our good Captain Valdivia. Anybody got any suggestions?"

"Aye," replied Suarez, a burly soldier who had never lost his calm. "I suggest we knock out your teeth, and perhaps use them to saw through these accursed bars. Have you any objections, friend Guerrero?"

Instead of answering, Juan looked at the manacles on his wrists. The blow that had broken the chain had broken a link at its center, forcing the two broken ends so closely together that Juan had not been able to remove it. One end had an exceedingly sharp point. He grinned at Suarez.

"By God, Suarez, rejoice! Your wit has at last produced an idea. This link here has a very sharp point. Perhaps, with patience, we might cut through a couple of those bars."

He was at once surrounded by excited men. The beginning was deferred until night.

Night after night they worked, covering the nicked bottoms of the two bars each morning with the grass supplied them for bedding. At the end of the fourth night the work was done. Two bars were ready to be removed, but dawn was lightening the sky, so the escape had to be put off until that night.

All through the endless day every move in their direction filled them with fear. It was, however, evident early that no festivities were planned. Men worked here and there in the plaza, painting or repairing. The market filled, and troops of men with stone axes in their hands passed by the cell, staring curiously as they went by. The white men cursed in relief, and once more ate only lightly of the food brought them, hiding the rest as an escape supply under the grass.

At last darkness moved out of the jungle into the plaza. Statues seemed to come to life in the dancing gleams of the temple fires. Through these flickering shadows seven men

moved quickly with Juan in the lead. The black jungle toward which they were moving was spangled with fireflies. They avoided the patrols successfully, and disappeared into the jungle.

The plaza had seemed dark but the jungle darkness was a mirror of velvet. Juan followed the forest edge until he came to a wide path down which he trotted, the others close behind. Twice they mistook fireflies for the torches of pursuers. From far off in the jungle came a long, mournful sound.

"Ohhh. Ohhh. Ohhh. Ohhh." It was repeated again and again. Juan felt the hair rise on his head and dimly saw his nearest companion cross himself. They were following the path on which they had been brought to the town. At the first intersection they turned away from the sea where they would first be sought.

It was like being in a great building, this jungle where not a breath of air stirred. In spite of the discomfort, of thorns in his bare feet, of bruises from stumbling over logs and stumps, Juan was suddenly content. This jungle was a friendly refuge in spite of its natural dangers. It was a refuge of unknown thousands of miles, separated from men, a haven in which he might spend his life.

They ran past cornfields where deer fed. Once, from across the trail, came a sound like a cough: deep, hoarse and unmistakably wild and menacing. They huddled close together. One of the men who had spent a great deal of time in Darien, clutched at Juan with trembling hands.

"A jaguar! One of those big yellow spotted devils! I've heard them in the mountains back of Darien!" They tried not to breathe as the cough rasped again. It was a frightening sound, especially to naked, unarmed men in the black jungle. At closer range it was more like a growl than a cough. The jaguar growled a third time, and a silence worse than the growl followed. Juan led the group on, and they heard no more of the jaguar.

At the next open place Juan found the north star. He took his bearing from it and followed a path toward the unknown west. The others followed gladly. They had one objective: to get as far away from the pyramid and its blue-painted priest as possible.

At dawn they rested in a thorn thicket where they remained for the day. At night they moved west again, and near midnight stumbled on a village built around its waterhole. The water lured them down, but the barking chorus

of village dogs drove them into the night again. From small pools or puddles they had an occasional drink.

When they found fruit they recognized, they ate. In an abandoned cornfield they ate quantities of green corn. But the insects were worse than hunger. Mosquitoes swarmed around them, gnats bit, and jungle leeches sucked. Ticks began to make them miserable. Each morning found them weaker. It was harder for them to travel now, though they did it by day.

On the sixth night a man disappeared. He was with them when they lay wearily on the ground, but in the morning he was gone. Unnerved, they were ready to give up and die. That day was a nightmare through which the remaining six staggered along an unending trail. At one place Juan saw a large tree covered with pink blossoms, its overhanging boughs nearly blocking the trail. He pushed the fragrant mass aside to meet, face to face, a Maya chief wearing his feathered helmet, a score of soldiers behind him. Too weak to run or to resist, the Spaniards were taken prisoner again.

Juan noticed that these men were painted orange and black instead of yellow and green and he hoped that this difference was more than superficial.

Their captors took them to their king, an elderly man whose wrinkled face showed no hatred as he looked at the white men. The white walls of his throne room were covered with brilliant designs; the ceiling was of smooth cedar planking. One side of the room was open to a garden, and the throne itself was a bench with jaguars' heads for arms. A wooden canopy, carved and painted to look like featherwork, was over the throne and above that was a gold leaf sun, its rays deflected by the wooden awning.

The keen eyes of the king looked carefully at the captives, at their emaciated bodies, their hollow eyes and insect bites. Finally, the king spoke a few words, simultaneously raising and lowering the feathered mace he held, and soldiers led the white men from the room.

The sun's glare in the white-stoned plaza was an added torture, and to their deep relief, they were taken into what proved to be barracks. There they were shown to a large room filled with cane beds. Food, water and a cooling salve for their bites were brought to them. Afterwards, they slept.

The next morning they felt refreshed and were fed thin maize cakes, vegetables and fruit three times that day. It was much better than ship's food, and they ate with enjoyment. On the following day they were taken to the well.

"Cenote," their guards said, pointing at it with their chins. Juan noticed that the well had apparently been formed by the collapse of a shell of stone that lay beneath the soil. It made a kind of natural shallow pond a hundred paces across. Wide steps had been cut down to the clear water. Wooden tubs were at the water's edge; clay water jars and fires were ready to heat water. Juan, Aguilar and Valera started work with enthusiasm. The others were reluctant: they'd been wet several times in the last month and felt no pressing need of a bath. But Juan and Valera urgently advised them to take advantage of the opportunity. When, finally, they emerged from the tubs of warm water refreshed after a scrub with a pulpy sort of soap, razors of obsidian were handed to them. A great many curious Maya had assembled to watch, and now, partially restored in body and clean, the Spaniards began to feel their lack of clothing acutely.

They were, therefore, profoundly pleased by the arrival of a man with an armful of cotton cloth. There were a loin cloth, a pair of sandals and a square cloak for each of them. With some direction from the amused audience they dressed themselves and were astonished at the confidence the narrow strips of cotton gave them.

"God above!" Valera almost sang. "I feel a man again. Look at those girls admiring us! Not bad, eh? We've done worse than that in the islands, eh, lads?"

"Well, by St. James!" replied Suarez. "Listen to Flat Nose himself. He no sooner gets a piece of rag around his manhood than he starts wanting to take it off again."

Valera joined in the laughter.

"The circumstances and the company alter things, my friend. I speak for the small wench with the red flower in her hair."

"My sons, my sons." Aguilar's dark face was sad. "Praise God for his goodness instead of wishing to lie with heathen wenches. Look what He has done for us!"

"This welcome puts me in mind of our reception to the friendless Indians in Santa Domingo, Suarez," said Juan. "Remember how we fed, clothed and comforted them?"

Suarez shrugged. "Yes, I remember. We fed them the whip, clothed them with welts and comforted them with horse and hound. What matter? They're only Indian dogs."

Juan and Valera talked soberly that night.

"What do you think they mean to do with us, Juan?"

"I don't know, Chato. But they've fed and clothed us in-

stead of stripping us naked and keeping us in prison. I suppose we'll be made slaves."

"Aye. You're probably right. Well, I've lived through one stint as a galley slave and no bondage could be worse than that. I think St. James watches over us, Juan. We've been very lucky."

The next day a grave man in priest's robes looked them over carefully, one by one.

"One of their doctors," guessed Juan. "I'll wager we're considered recovered now. I wonder what comes next."

In the afternoon they were lined up outside the barracks. Aguilar was at the head of the line, then Valera, then Juan. A group of officers with a dozen soldiers marched up. Fear ran down the Spanish line. What now? Were they to be sacrificed? Was the kindness only a blind for a deadly purpose?

One of the officers looked at the line for a moment and pointed to Aguilar and Valera. Soldiers pulled them from the line and pushed them after the officer as he walked away. Juan tried to follow but he was pulled back roughly.

"Valera! Valera!" he cried.

Valera turned, only to be shoved forward again.

"Look," said Juan desperately to the guards, forgetting their inability to understand him. "He's my friend, let me go with him!"

They were adamant to the plea in Juan's voice and one of them raised a club threateningly.

"No use, Gonzales," called Valera. "Good luck, lad. We'll meet again. Good-bye."

They vanished, and the world felt cold and empty to Juan. The second official, a man with an orange feather in his hair, touched Juan's shoulder and motioned to him to follow.

"Co-ox," he said curtly.

Juan looked at the three remaining white men.

"This seems to be farewell, boys. Good luck. If you get back, give the priests my fond farewells. They'll never see me again. Good-bye."

He had a brief glimpse of them as he took one last look back. They were being led away by a man with a whip under his arm, followed by a file of soldiers. Now Juan felt utterly alone.

Juan and his guide were soon out of town on a path which, like all the others they had been on, meandered by cornfields and through green jungle. Gray clouds blew up and rain began to fall. Juan wrapped himself in the cotton

cloak, and found that the finely woven material was nearly waterproof. As he stumbled along the muddy path, he wondered when he'd see a white face again. The rusty irons chafed his wrists and ankles, and he swore at their clanking.

After an hour's walk they reached a small village where men and women watched them pass and called questions in cheerful voices. Juan's guide turned into the gateway of a low-walled yard that contained two huts. They stepped before the first.

Juan stood before a porch that was open on three sides. The fourth side was a wall, through which a door opened into a hut made of reeds covered with white stucco. The place smelled of smoke, cooking food and perfume. A stocky man with a pleasant face came out on the porch. The soldier spoke briefly to him, and pointed to Juan. He then turned to Juan, flicked a thumb over his shoulder at the Maya, said, "Ah Che," and departed. Ah Che gave the soldier the Maya salute: right hand raised to shoulder height, palm up and fingers spread, then moved up and down a few times as if weighing something in the palm. Finally he turned to Juan.

"Bixabel."

The word of greeting was made friendly by a slap on the shoulder and a smile. Juan had learned the correct answer.

"Toh in wol."

Ah Che smiled again at the words and motioned Juan into the hut.

CHAPTER 13

When Juan reached the village of Ichmul, it was nearly four o'clock, and the main meal of the day had been over for two hours. Ah Che, The Tree, seated himself on a woven mat and picked up his pipe, which had a stone bowl and a long wooden stem decorated with scarlet feathers. He filled it with brown grains from a gourd and lit it with an ember from the fire. He was soon half-hidden by fragrant blue smoke. Juan watched the smoke puff from Ah Che's mouth and nose, but when Ah Che offered him a pipe, Juan refused. His stomach was too empty for such an experiment.

"Are you hungry, white man?" asked Ah Che in Maya.

Juan understood. He had learned these phrases in the cage.

"Yes, Ah Che, I am hungry."

At Ah Che's call a sturdy woman came out, smiled at Juan and busied herself at the fireplace made of three round stones. She wore only the short petticoat within this, her home, and her full breasts swayed as she moved. Juan eagerly accepted the gourd of food she offered him.

"Thank you."

"It's nothing," she answered.

The gourd contained thin corn cakes and black beans, well-cooked and warm from the fire. Juan ate with a good appetite.

This Maya farmer's home was a functional, well-built structure. The open porch was the family living room. Low-eaved against rain and sun, and relatively free of smoke, it was highly suitable as a living and cooking apartment in the tropics. The floor was hard-packed earth, on which was spread mats of woven fronds. A low stone table was in the center with the fireplace at one end. Gourds hung from the wall, and earthenware dishes were arranged in racks. A broom stood in one corner. The enclosed portion of the house was a sleeping room in which were pallets of woven, pliable cane, spread with dry grass and heavy square cotton coverlets different from those worn as cloaks only by their heavier weight.

Various people came into the hut, evidently to finish chores. Two small children brought in bundles of wood. A girl of about sixteen carried two jars of water. Juan was introduced to each one by Ah Che.

There was Ix Cum, The Cooking Pot, Ah Che's wife. Juan liked her at once. The eldest son, already stocky and muscular, was Ah Wech. The eldest daughter, shy, slender and pretty was Ix Makoe, The Hibiscus. The smaller children were less formally presented and their names, for the moment, escaped Juan and he had only a quick glimpse of a girl some years younger than the Hibiscus.

One fact impressed Juan. If these people were typical, the Maya were a very clean people. The house was clean; they were clean, and their white clothing, spotless and fresh. There was no odor of bodies or perspiration about the house, only the smells of food, of smoke and of perfume.

Other Maya dropped in for a social call. The men sat with Juan and Ah Che around the fire and joined their host in a

pipe. One or two produced short, cylindrical rolls of brown leaves, lit them from the fire and exhaled smoke that smelled quite different from the pipe smoke. Ah Che noticed Juan's inquiring look.

"Zicar," he said, and took one from a shelf and offered it to Juan, who shook his head and smiled his thanks. It was a pleasant evening. Rain pattered on the roof thatch and gurgled from the eaves. Wood smoke occasionally mingled with the tobacco smoke. The low, musical voices rose and fell. During silences, they could hear the laughter of women from the sleeping quarters.

When the company had gone and night had fallen there was another meal. With it was served a hot, sweet drink that tasted of maize and honey. Then, early, for the next day was a working day, the family went to bed.

Juan followed Ah Wech, The Armadillo, to the smaller hut which was used partially as a storeroom and had no open living room. There were three beds: the Armadillo motioned to one, spoke a phrase, removed his loin cloth and sandals and rolled himself into the covers of another. Juan followed his example at once. A faint smell of smoke blew into the hut. Rain pattered on the roof. A night bird called mournfully from the wet jungle close by.

Juan had recovered enough from exhaustion and weakness to lie awake for a long time, lost, sad and unutterably alone. He missed Valera and worried about him. He wondered, too, about his own status and his future. What was he here? A slave, probably. But for how long? The vision of one of the white pyramids flashed before him and that brought uncertainty and fear.

Ah Wech moaned and stirred on his bed. Juan stiffened until he heard regular breathing again. Juan was sure he could steal from the hut, but what dangers peopled the night? Where would he go? He couldn't speak the language, and he knew enough of the terrors of the jungle to be certain he could not face them alone. Obviously, he must stay where he was until he knew enough about the people and the country to go in search of Valera.

That decision calmed him, and he slept.

Mist dripped from the trees and dawn was gray when a hand shook Juan awake. After a simple meal of tortillas, beans and more of the hot maize and honey drink, Juan set out into the jungle with Ah Che and his son. The forest was as fresh as a spring day after the rain. Orioles sang from treetops and birds were bright spots against the green of the

jungle. Finally, they reached a cornfield at sunrise, and Juan, after watching Ah Che, began weeding a row of corn. The smell of cornstalks, fresh earth and the nearby jungle filled his nostrils. The work was easy, and the sun's early warmth was pleasant on his back. But as the day wore on, the sun grew hot, sweat poured down his face, and gnats came to the feast. When he straightened to rest his back, his two companions got way ahead. Their friendliness made him want to do his best, and his pride as a man refused to let him do less. Pains began shooting down his back, the sweat was salty in his mouth and the rows of corn seemed endless.

"God!" he groaned to himself as he rubbed the small of his back with both hands. "First a noble, then an outcast, a private soldier, and now a farmer! What would the boatswain say to that? Judas, but my back aches!"

He was very glad when, in the middle of the morning, they stopped to drink corn milk and rest. The shade was delicious and the earth felt soft.

The working day ended about two hours after noon. Juan was blind to the beauties of the jungle as they trudged home. But Ix Cum had a hot bath waiting for him in the sleeping hut, and its heat soothed his aching muscles. A meal of tortillas, beans, chocolate and deer meat followed, and when Juan relaxed in new contentment on the porch with Ah Che he took his first pull at a pipe. He was cautious, so that it did not make him ill, and he enjoyed the feeling of release it gave him.

Soon after Juan settled into his new life in the Maya village, he built a crude forge of stone and mud and made a deerskin bellows. With Ah Wech's help he kindled a fire in the forge. After hours of patient work and countless minor burns, he freed himself of his ankle and wrist irons and hid them under his bed until the plan he'd made could be worked out.

Juan arrived at the hut of Ah Che on September 11th. In the Mayan calendar—the Count of Days—it was 13 Ahau 7 Zip. Through the month of Zip he worked with his new friends. Each day gave him a dozen new words and phrases. By the end of the month of Tzec, in November, he could talk, he could really carry on a conversation again without dumb show. He no longer thought of the months as September, October, May or July. They were Zots, Tzec, Muan, Cumhu.

As soon as Juan was sure of what he was saying he in-

quired after Valera. Ah Che shrugged his shoulders, but arranged to make an early trip to the city.

"White man," Ah Che said when he returned from the city, "I am sorry that I can tell you so little of your friend. He had hair of a bright and awesome red, is it not so? Yes. Well, your friend and one other were given to the True Man of Tulum as evidence of the friendship between our nation and his. There is no more to be known."

"How far away is Tulum, Ah Che?"

"Ten suns' journey. A long way."

"Yes. What of the other three white men?"

"They were sent to the quarries. I heard that one was already dead. Men live short lives in the quarries. Rejoice that your friend was not sent there. At Tulum he should be safe. With his red feathers he is an oddity, and the True Man will preserve him for the sake of friendship. Some day you will find him again."

Juan had to be content with that. His longing for his old friend was in no way stilled, but his loneliness was not so deep as before. Now, too, he had made friends in the Maya village.

My Lord Sun rose daily in Likin, the East. Each night he set in Chikin, the bed of the sun, and the Maya thought the tropical sunsets were only the vapor from his sleepy yawns. One day in the forest Juan saw a yellow hawk perched in a gumbo-limbo tree. It made him remember the war banner of the Moncadas, the three hawks on black and gold pennons. Ah Che saw the joy of memory on Juan's face.

"That bird means much to you. Is it so?"

"Yan. Yes. That bird is the sign of my family."

"By Yum Chac! You are no longer one of no name. You are Ah Muan Kan—The Golden Hawk!"

So Juan Moncada got his Mayan name: Ah Muan.

It was a black and silver night in the dry season. Ixchel rose early. The tangled web of the jungle was peaceful in her light, and great fireflies glimmered in the clearings. Night birds sang. The cicada, the kind called Chipit-tin whose rasping foretells a dry spell, stamped a lazy rhythm on the small talk of the family. Smoke curled from the pipes of Juan, Ah Wech and Ah Che. Ix Cum was spinning in the moonlight, her strong face content at this hour with her men.

"So," said Ah Che between puffs, "at dawn the hunter

reached, half in sleep, for the lovely maiden whose warm body had been by his side through the night. His seeking hand touched only the smooth bark of the witch's tree! Instantly wide awake, he moaned in despair. Now he understood why the night's passionate love had been more wonderful than the sight of green corn in the breeze! He had loved an X-Tabai, one of those witches of the forest who are trees in the day but who, on certain mystic nights, become maidens. He knew now that it was likely that never again would mortal woman satisfy him. He must become a searcher of the night. Never again could his beloved wife bring him sleep after joy until he had found the X-Tabai again and loved her again. Only in this way could he be free of her spell.

"So, my friend and my son, the wise stay out of the forest at night. If you are caught there and must remain, beware of white bodies glimmering among the trees, beware of sweet voices in the night!"

Ix Cum laughed.

"Ah, my not so wise child! Take your own advice. Let the sun's sleeping time find you curled up at your hearth. I want no man yearning for an X-Tabai when he lies in my arms. But it grows late. I go to bed."

Now Juan even found a half-contentment, a nerve-soothing kind of peace. Only the uncertainty of his future and Valera's absence kept him from being almost happy. His renewed vitality brought a rebirth of hope, and he began to lay definite plans for the future.

He was unguarded, but the jungle was prison enough. To try to escape that prison he started to become familiar with it, hunting and walking in its depths whenever he had time. The jungle in that part of Yucatan was dry and thorny, the bright flowers gone except in areas where the rains had collected and kept it wet. There the jungle was still green and bright. Juan had to learn to be indifferent to ticks. He understood now why the jungle, as he had first seen it at the end of the rainy season, had been so different, so luxuriant, so fragrant and so free of ticks. Ah Che taught him woodcraft. After a time he went part way on the road to Tulum where Valera was held. Once he got lost and wandered in the jungle for two days. When he found his way back to the village, Ah Che embraced him and Ix Cum wept with joy. The realization that he was loved tied Juan closer to these people.

He had often noticed the girls of the village, who were jolly as wives, demure as maidens and seductive as young

widows and divorcees. There had been glances for him, but as yet he had made no response to them. One woman he had noticed was Ix Koben, the Hearth. She was slender, taller than most and her hair was of a lustrous blue-black. Her eyes sparkled with life, and her figure was graceful and rounded. One day when Juan and Ah Che came home from the fields early, they saw the women bathing together at the water's edge. Juan saw Ix Koben among the others. Her shoulders and legs were bronzed by the sun, and he could see the contrasting lightness of her breasts and loins. The women saw Juan and Ah Che, and laughed as they scurried for petticoats. Ix Koben looked again at Juan and turned away. Her slender back and the cream-smooth swell of her hips were quickly covered by white cloth. Ix Cum scolded her men when she returned from her bath that day.

Ah Che told Juan of Ix Koben's past. She was a widow, and when a Mayan woman lost her husband, she went into strict mourning for a year. After that she had full freedom. Marriage and divorce were easy. A widow or divorcee could take a husband merely by giving him something to eat in the presence of witnesses. He married her by eating the food she gave him. Divorce was accomplished by either husband or wife renouncing the other.

At the end of the month of Zax the harvest was to start. A lucky day in the middle of the month was therefore chosen for the puberty ceremony for children who had made the step into adulthood during the last year. Ah Che's second youngest daughter, Ix Huun, was among those who were to take part.

On the fourth day before the ceremony Ah Che started eating almost before daylight. He kept at it all day, eating great quantities of food.

"Ix Cum, is there a famine threatening that your man stuffs himself all day?" asked Juan. "There goes the third gourd of tortillas and as many of beans have preceded them. Shall I hide tortillas under my bed that I may eat tonight?"

Ix Cum smiled.

"It's the Descent of the Gods, my son. Our daughter becomes a woman in four days. For three days before, the fathers must not eat. That is why Ah Che stuffs himself in advance with food."

A Maya sitting nearby laughed.

"Do you notice, friend Muan, that Ah Che looks pale and weary and that Ix Cum resembles a well-fed tiger cat, purring with satisfaction? For three days a man must stay away

from his wife. Ah Che is a thoughtful man, always prepared for any eventuality!"

Ix Cum laughed and rapped him lightly on the head with u kab ca, a rolling pin made of stone.

"Ten years ago that would have bothered me. Now, three days will only be a well-earned rest," Ah Che said.

Again Ix Cum lifted the rolling pin, this time in Ah Che's direction.

The day of the festival was bright and clear. Hundreds of smiling, chattering Mayas strolled about the village in holiday dress. Many of the young women wore only the short petticoat with a bright scarf tied over their breasts. When the sun sank down to the tops of the trees and cool shade touched the place of ceremony, a drum called everyone to the papalna, a long, open-sided structure of thatch.

In the papalna, the children, wearing new clothes, were drawn up in two lines, boys in one, girls in the other. The floor had been spread with fresh leaves, and the four older men who had been chosen as assistants stood as silence fell and the priest entered wearing a white robe with blue sashes and carrying an aspergillum to sprinkle the holy water—a carved stick with rattlesnake rattles hanging from it. He took his place before a brazier next to a table bearing cornmeal and copal incense.

The four assistants walked to the four corners of the hall, holding a long cord that stretched around most of the floor. The line of children moved slowly toward the priest, and each child stood briefly before him to receive a pinch of maize and incense which the child then put on the brazier with a short prayer. When all the children had done this, the brazier, the cord and a gourd of wine were given to an assistant who carried them to the edge of the jungle. He was not to stop on the way, drink the wine, or look back on the return trip.

And so the evil spirits were banished.

When the ceremony was finished, and the children dismissed, there was a feast of turkeys, peccaries, venison, partridge and many vegetables and countless jars and gourds of sweet and potent wine.

Soon after the feast started, Juan felt someone slip quietly to his side. It was Ix Koben. She smiled and leaned close. He looked up to see the Hibiscus, Ah Che's eldest daughter, glaring at them. Ix Koben saw her.

"I see that I have a rival, Ah Muan. Do many women seek you for their hut?"

"No women seek me, Ix Koben. I am a slave. I have nothing to offer."

"Yes. It is sad to be a slave. Let us have more wine. Enough wine can cure any ill."

She leaned forward again to take a wine gourd and Juan felt her body against his bare arm. A warmth was beginning to rise in his blood. His ears rang with a kind of thunder and a lightness lifted him. Moonlight made the night bright. Torches were lighted inside. As time passed the tumult grew, though Juan saw the priest still quiet and grave in his place. There were songs and some of the men danced. Ix Koben hummed a little song. He took her hand, and she leaned toward him.

"The moonlight is soft," he said. She squeezed his hand.

"And the perfume of flowers is on the wind," she answered.

"Shall we go to the woods, my Koben?"

"Aren't you afraid you might meet an X-Tabai, Ah Muan?"

"Why should I fear to meet an X-Tabai when the queen of them all is already with me?"

They went together into the moonlight. The jungle trees were like the dim arches rising to the vaulted roof of a cathedral. The blackness was shot with rays of silver. The gold bird sang his soaring chant and a poor-me-one breathed his ghostly chant—a whisper of woe, which, as it grew stronger, mingled with the hum of insects and the sigh of the night wind.

"He is sad because he is not one of us, my sweetheart."

"Some say he is the soul of one who died of love and now spends his nights searching for the spirit of a lover who still lives. I think, Muan, that if I could not have you, I would sigh in the same manner."

The moon was like a silver spotlight on a frangipani bush. Great white blossoms drifted down to the soft moss below and the ineffable sweetness filled the warm air. Juan untied Ix Koben's girdle with clumsy fingers, lifted the huipile over her warm black hair. The petticoat was held by a fold which he released and lifted aside. Her slender body was naked in the dappled moonlight which filtered through the frangipani bush above them. She lay with her hands shoulder high, palms upward, and looked at him, her eyes soft with desire. A white blossom drifted from the bush, swirled and settled between her firm-tipped breasts.

The haunting cry of the poor-me-one filled the night again

and again. The friendly bush hid them from the dews, and fireflies lighted their bed when the moon went down.

Juan had made love before, but never had it been so joyous as this. In Spain and in Italy there had been either young girls, half frightened with the knowledge of sin, or women who made love for gain or security in a war torn land. In their bodies Juan had felt fear, sin or greed.

Here there were none of these. Ix Koben had kept her virginity until her marriage. As a widow there were no restrictions on her conduct. This was no sin: it was a gift of kind gods, a gift given to her that she could give to Juan, and giving it receive it back again. She wanted no reward, no gain. She made love laughing, and her only sighs were of pleasure and joy. In the warmth of her lightheartedness, Juan felt the centuries-hardened shackles of sin dropping from him, and this love became as natural as breath. With it there came no remorse, no disgust, no cold distaste or uncleanness.

The white blossom on her breast, crushed, gave out its sharpest scent. Juan breathed deeply, calm and at peace. He put his lips against the flower petals: they were no smoother than her skin.

"You smell of the flower, Ix Koben. Is it the frangipani tree the X-Tabai becomes when the magic night is over?"

"There is no magic, my man," she said, caressing his scarred back with her hands. "I won't vanish, Ah Muan. I smell of frangipani because, thinking of you and hoping for you, I rubbed my body everywhere with the crushed flowers."

Juan kissed her again.

"This flower here," said Ix Koben, touching the broken blossom on her breast, "smells the sweetest of all because we crushed it together."

Juan could see her happy smile as he took two curved petals from a fresh blossom and put one carefully over each of her small nipples.

"There, woman," he said solemnly. "Lovers for barely an hour and already I give you a new dress!"

"And a lovely dress, though maybe not so modest as it might be."

"I can add another petal."

"I love it, man, I love it. And when I'm with you, I shall hope never to wear any other."

"Ix Koben."

"Yes, Golden Hawk."

A night bird called softly.

"My man, my sun, my lover," whispered Ix Koben over and over as she stroked his cheek.

Truly Juan Moncada held an X-Tabai in his arms. Would any other woman be able to satisfy him again? Would he, too, become a searcher of the night? He remembered the warning of Ah Che.

"Beware of white bodies glimmering among the trees. Beware of sweet voices in the night!"

The household rose late the next morning. Ah Che nursed a head that apparently felt considerably larger than usual. He growled first that the tortillas were cold, next that they were overcooked. Ix Cum sighed with the practiced patience that plainly says, "We've been through this before."

"If one arose before Ah Kin was above the tallest trees, perhaps the tortillas would not have to be kept warming before the fire until they turned black, my poor mistreated one," she said. "Perhaps, too, a little less wine at a festival might improve tempers the next morning. Who knows?"

Ah Che shifted his attention to the grinning Juan in an effort to change the subject.

"There is one among us who perhaps was warmed at a hearth for too long last night, eh, Ah Muan?"

Juan looked carefully over his body and arms.

"I find no scorched places, my friend. Besides, my head is clear and fits properly on my shoulders. Perhaps one is jealous?"

Ix Cum laughed.

"Ah, son Muan, there is an arrow that went to its mark! Jealous he is, but do not worry. A woman like Ix Koben seeks no lovers among old, gnarly worn-out Trees. But let me look at you, Ah Muan. I can see, I can see. She gave you joy."

"Yes, mother," said Juan. "She gave me great joy. I am sad that I can give her nothing. As a slave I will not marry."

"No. No, Muan. But don't be sad that you have nothing to give her. She came to me this morning, and you have given her dreams, that I could tell, and there was happiness in her voice."

Suddenly Ix Makoe walked over to Juan, took his arm and put it around her.

"Am I not pretty too, Golden Hawk? Must you go to the next field for flowers?"

Before Juan could make a laughing reply, Ix Cum glared

at her daughter, turned to the eaves and came back with a string of red chile peppers in her hand.

"Ix Makoe! You know what happens to young girls who misbehave? Didn't you hear the Butterfly screaming the other morning? Do you want to have the red pepper rubbed where it will have the most effect? Then watch your ways, my daughter."

Ix Makoe looked at her grim parent and fled. Juan could see her shudder as she ran. Ix Cum turned to him, and he smiled.

"Fear not, Ix Cum. Your daughter is my little sister."

She patted his arm. "Do you think I don't know that, son Muan? All the same, young girls need watching and warning."

"Ix Cum remembers her own girlhood," said Ah Che. "Who understands a woman better than another woman?"

CHAPTER 14

The year of the Maya revolved around corn. His cities, his temples, his millions, all lived by the bounty of Yum Chac, God of Corn.

New fields were cleared in the wet season when stone axes could more easily fell green trees and brush. They were left where they fell until the dry season parched out the juices and dried the leaves. Then, on a windy day toward the end of the dry season, when priests had watched certain stars set precisely where they ought behind stone monuments, the fields were burned. Smoke blackened the sky over the land. The Maya watched anxiously and whistled, so that Kukulkan's winds would help get a good, clean burn.

When the wet season came and the forest bloomed in a rainbow of blossoms, the Maya came to the fields with their xul, their planting stick, and their chim, seed bags. The sharp sticks made holes in the earth into which the seeds were dropped, corn and beans and squash, but mostly corn. A push of the foot raked the dirt over the hole and tamped it down.

With good rains the corn grew several inches in a day. By fall the stalks stood high, green and beautiful. The Maya was glad as he walked between the towering rows. He, the

little man, had made this beauty with the help of Yum Chac and Chac, the Rain God. The bellies of those he loved would be full during the year.

When the corn was ripe, the tops of the stalks were bent, turned down to the ground as if surrendering to the will of the man who had made them grow. At harvest time the whole village picked the corn, shelled it, stored most of it in granaries near the fields and carried some of it back to the village. They ate well of it, and it gave them strength to go into the forest to clear a new field and plant more corn. Corn was life.

One moonlit night Juan asked Ah Che about the Maya gods and the latter lit a fresh pipe, settled his shoulders with greater comfort against a door post and began.

"First, my friend, is Hunab Ku, the One Only God. He made the world, the earth, the sky, the stars and man himself. His son, Itzamna, the master of day and night, is a friend of man. Then there is Chac, the Rain God, who must come each year or we die. He brings us his son, Yum Chac, the God of Corn, a young god, dressed in green and gold and a friend to all men. Against men is Ah Puch, the God of Death, who announces his coming with the ringing of small metal bells."

"You have many gods, Ah Che."

"There are more yet. Ek Chuah, the Black War Captain, is the God of War. And Kukulkan, the God of Air, the Feathered Serpent. In the sky now, you may see Ixchel, the Moon Goddess. Her husband is Kinich Ahau, the Sun God."

"Don't forget Ixtab, my man," said Ix Cum. "That would be bad luck."

"Bad luck, indeed," said Ah Che. "Ixtab is the Goddess of Suicide. She goes always with a rope around her neck. You know, Ah Muan, that any person who kills himself by hanging is taken at once to paradise, forever."

"A strange belief."

"Strange perhaps, but it is so." Ah Che knocked out his pipe. "Ah, well. A new field tomorrow. I am older than some. I go to bed."

A few weeks later Juan went to Uxul to witness the great festival of the Recompensing of the God. The town was thronged with people and a holiday feeling was in the air. As soon as Juan saw it, it brought back frightening memories. From the temple came the beating of drums and the monotonous chants. His own imprisonment as a victim for sacrifice was suddenly vivid as Juan saw the procession mov-

ing toward the pyramid—the priests, soldiers, chanters and the blue-painted victims. The two men who were to be sacrificed walked without bonds, gayly dressed, on their heads high flower crowns. They walked as though they were on the brink of paradise, as, to a Maya, they were. Victims of sacrifice went at once to a land of eternal bliss where corn grew without labor, and wine and beautiful maidens were everywhere.

The loud chant swelled from the pyramid top. Juan looked about him at the well-known faces of his friends as if they were strangers. Only Ix Cum's smile reassured him. He found he was clenching his hands until the nails dug into his palms when the chant rose to a crescendo. He now knew that the victim's heart was torn, still beating, from his chest and put on a platter before the god. The chant stopped when the heart on the platter gave its last beat.

After a pause the chant recommenced as the second victim was prepared for sacrifice, and Juan saw the first body twisting and falling down the steps of the pyramid into the crowd below. The chant grew loud again. Ix Koben was pale, and Ah Che was staring, his jaw set, a glassy, hypnotized look in his eyes. Juan could see the cords of his neck bulging and his hands, too, were clenched.

But this time, before reaching its final frenzy, the chant stopped. A shout echoed from the top of the pyramid, and the spell over the crowd broke. People looked at one another and murmured questions. There was a long pause; then a procession started down the steps. When the crowd saw that the second victim still lived, it shouted with one voice. Ah Che pushed away through the crowd.

"What happened, Ix Cum?" asked Juan, shaking his head as if to shake his head clear of that chant.

"I don't know, Hawk, unless the god rejected the sacrifice and took another. I saw it happen once, when I was a girl."

Ix Koben pressed close to Juan and took his hand. He saw that her color had returned. The palm of her hand felt calloused and hard from work, but he saw again how slim and graceful the hand itself was. Ah Che returned.

"The god rejected the sacrifice! Instead he took one of the soldiers of the guard!"

He explained to Juan that before the sacrifice, the priests purify the temple and drive away the evil spirits, just as they had done in the puberty ceremony Juan had seen. Then,

since all evil spirits are banished, only the gods are inside. If someone dies within the purified area before the chosen victim is killed, the god has disdained the intended man for another more to his liking.

"One of the guards, a man who was born at the village next to ours, killed himself just as they were putting the chosen one on the altar!" said Ah Che in awe. "He cut his throat with his own knife."

"But why?"

"Why? Because the god loved him and wanted him, of course! The god made him do it. He's a fortunate man. Any one chosen in this way becomes a Batob, a noble, in paradise, a lord of heaven."

"What happens to the rejected man?"

"Nothing. He is freed, but people will look at him out of the corners of their eyes for the rest of his days. He must have committed some secret crimes to have been rejected. Pity him, Ah Muan, he can never hope for paradise, only Mitnal with its gray cold—unless perhaps the gods allow him to die in battle."

That day roused Juan to action, and the next afternoon he went to his forge, got a charcoal fire going and brought out the rusty steel cuffs and anklets. He weighed them in his hand, pursed his lips and whistled. His eye was on the forest, but his mind was in the blacksmith shop of Manuel Lopez in Marchena.

Clay mixed with grass made a good mold. He constructed a wooden blade and covered it with the clay, in two sections, lining the inner side of the clay with cotton cloth. Then he baked the whole thing for hours. Next he carefully separated the two halves of the mold, peeled away the charred cloth, scraped vent holes and a pouring hole and bound the holes together.

The forge sent a column of smokeless heat into the air, and the irons lay above the blue flame in a clay bowl. Ah Wech pumped the bellows while Juan fed the fire. At last the metal was molten. With hardwood tongs, Juan lifted the vessel and poured the steel into the funneled mold. Then, with a prayer, he lay the smoking mass aside for the night. The next day he broke the clay. The forging was good: it looked like a sword blade already, though it needed shaping and tempering.

The Mayan hammer Juan used was a two-inch thick disk of hard granite secured to a flexible wooden handle. Day after day it rang on the metal, as time and again Juan

shaped the blade, trying the balance and feel as he did so. When it was the proper shape he tempered it as Manuel had taught him. Finally, evening after evening, he rubbed it with an abrasive stone to give it an edge. The whirr went on and on until Ix Cum threatened to change his name to Ah Chipit-tĭn, the Cicada.

Juan shaped a hilt of hardwood to fit his fingers, secured it to the tang of the sword, got its feel in his hand. The sword was thirty inches long and an inch and a half wide, heavy, well-balanced, well-tempered and keen. He swung it in the strokes and parries he had learned in the tilt yards of Seville. He felt a man again. Against this weapon, the wooden swords of the Maya, with sharp but brittle obsidian, would be virtually useless. Anyway, whatever his fate, it would find him as a Moncada should be found—with a good sword in his hand.

His next project was to find some seasoned wood to make a six foot longbow and a quiver of arrows. Juan had handled a longbow in Spain and he smiled goodnaturedly at Ah Che's jokes about the Hawk carrying a tree through the jungle. Ah Che whistled at the length and weight of the arrows. Privately, he thought his white friend a little sick in the head.

Ix Koben came to Juan one night as he sat finishing the arrows. She watched him lash on the feathers and secure the obsidian heads to the heavy shafts.

"Ah Muan," she said, "why are you making these weapons?"

Juan had expected this question. He put down the arrow and turned to look at the woman by his side. He was beginning to realize the depth of his feeling for her. He hoped she might go with him when he escaped. She would be very useful, he knew, and besides, he wanted her. Now was the time to find out what she would do.

"I am going to leave, Ix Koben. I am going to a place where I will no longer be a slave, some city that will use me as a soldier. I am a soldier, Ix Koben!"

"Haven't you been happy here?"

"When I'm with you, I'm as happy as a slave can be, and Ah Che's family have been good to me. I love them, but I must not stay. There is nothing for me here, no future except a slave's."

"Are you going alone?" Her voice was calm, but Juan could hear the grief in it.

"Yes."

"You're not going alone, Ah Muan. Never! I'll go with you. Please take me with you! I know this land. I know my people. You are meant for power, Ah Muan. I can help you rise!"

"Will you really go with me, Ix Koben? Away from your home, away from your people?"

"You are my home. You are my people. I'll go anywhere with you, my Hawk!"

He put his arm on her shoulder and the touch said more than a kiss, more than words.

"Then we'll go together, Ix Koben."

He lost all doubt when he saw the happiness in her eyes.

The next day Ah Che returned from a trip to Uxul accompanied by a stranger.

"And without warning too!" lamented Ix Cum. "Here I am in my old petticoat and scarf, and no fresh tortillas made! Alas, Ah Muan, I am disgraced. A guest, and I am not prepared! Oh, that man! Wait until I get him alone."

The stranger was seated, offered food, chocolate and a pipe. When he had finished eating, Ah Che looked at Juan excitedly.

"Ah Muan Kan, our brother Ah Tupp Kabal is a soldier of Tulum. He has come on a journey with one of the lords of the court. He knows something of your friend!"

Juan stared at the round, red face of the visitor. He did not know how to begin to ask the questions he wanted answered. The visitor's name had caught his interest. It meant "Man Who Makes a Noise Like an Explosion." Juan had been waiting for the explosion to take place, but Ah Che's statement drove all thought of the name from his mind. Ah Tupp smiled most cordially at Juan.

"Is the Red-Haired One indeed a friend of yours? Hah! If our priests knew that, they would put a reward on your head!"

"Priests? A reward? But why?"

"Why? For fear you might some day come to Tulum. That red-haired man has set all our city at odds. First, he was made a servant in the palace. Then his wondrous magic made him so famous that men went no more to the temples. Instead they waited outside his dwelling place in the plaza until he would come out and eat fire and make things disappear in their presence. Ten thousand devils! He could take dead scorpions and beetles from the ears of a priest! He said that he wished only to show what the brains of

priests are made of. He did this even to the high priest, which proved a disaster."

"Disaster? What happened? Tell me quickly!"

"Why, the high priest selected him as victim to Ah Puch at his festival. It's a great honor, so no one could object."

Juan was afraid then. Was El Chato dead? He remembered the sacrifice in Uxul and stood up.

"Go on, man, go on."

"Well, the night before the sacrifice, six of the most beautiful girls in the town came to his prison, seduced the guards and released the Red-Haired One! He is now safe in the jungle with the other X-Tabai and Alux."

Juan shouted wth laughter and relief, and Ah Che joined him.

"He is indeed my friend. He has not changed at all. By St. James, but I'm proud of him!" But Juan sobered as he thought of Valera lost in the jungle.

"But he's no spirit, Ah Tupp, only a man. I fear for him, naked and unarmed in the jungle."

"Naked and unarmed? Not that one! With him went the fairest of the six girls, with food and weapons and cocoa beans. Don't waste your worry on that one. He's all right."

"Come, Ah Tupp, tell the Hawk about the other white man."

"The Crane? The solemn, long-legged one? Ah, my friends, these white men are strange! He, too, was made a servant in the palace and his good behavior and intelligence brought the king's notice to him. He made many wise suggestions for the improvement of the laws and the city. To reward him, the True Man sent one of the handsomest girls of the court to his chamber one night. You can't imagine what he did!"

"What?" asked Juan.

"He ordered her away!"

"Hunab Ku! What manner of man is this?" gasped Ah Che. Juan heard Ix Cum mutter from inside the house: "Ah Puch! Let a man treat me so, and I'll snatch his hair out."

"Well may you ask what manner of man he is," continued Ah Tupp, gratified at the sensation his news had caused. "The poor girl removed her clothes and climbed into his bed, believing that his protests were only a form of wooing. And would you believe it? The madman got out the other side and left the chamber!"

Ah Che was speechless. "What happened then?" asked Juan.

"Why, when the weeping girl returned to the king, he was angry and refused to believe her. He sent for the Crane and questioned him. The white man told the king that his religious vows forbade him ever to love a woman. The king could not believe such madness and had the Crane imprisoned. He was fed spicy foods and given only wine to drink. Then the king sent the most beautiful woman in the town to his bed, and he rejected her!"

"Heard you ever the like?" said Ah Che, in awe.

"Nor was that all. The king sent groups of girls, some naked, some clothed only in feathers or the sheerest cotton. He sent strong youths, and they and the maidens did their utmost for the honor of the town to make the Crane forego his vows. Wondrous spectacles were arranged to tempt him, but the man never changed his ways. I think he is mad."

"I think he is sick," said Ah Che.

"I think he is lacking an important part of his body!" came the irate voice of Ix Cum from inside the hut. "I wish to hear no more about such a wicked man!"

"What became of him?" asked Juan, laughing, but nonetheless full of admiration for the priest's willpower and faith.

"The king was so impressed with his strength of will that he set him free and made him a member of his council. His words are always good, but by all the gods, if that is the way to attain wisdom, make me a foolish man!"

Juan retired from the company to think over this news. He realized that it meant his own escape must be deferred. In the forest under the frangipani bush where he and Ix Koben had first made love were already stored food, cotton cloth, cocoa beans and his bow and arrows. A few more days and he would have been gone. But now . . .

Valera would try to find him here. If both were wandering in the jungle, searching for one another, years might pass before they met. He couldn't take that chance. For a while, at least, he must wait where he was for Valera. He went to tell Ix Koben the change in plans.

I hope Valera comes soon, he thought. I begin to smell evil for me here. Things have gone too well too long. By God! I'd like to take to that jungle out there, to that freedom, to run in it and be my own man again! Patience, Juan, patience. Valera will come.

It was in the middle of the Zabacil Than, the series of pleasant festivals that bring the Mayan year to an end. The rains were good, the corn was high, and it was a time of

plenty in the land. There was a good deal of wine drinking, many gay parties and continuous visiting. This was the happiest time of the Mayan year. Death, war and the other gods of desolation were momentarily forgotten. The Rain God and the God of Corn reigned.

One morning Ix Cum sobbed as the men sat down to breakfast.

"What ails Ix Cum, Tree? Is something wrong?"

"Yan," said Ah Che, gloomily. "Something wrong indeed. Last night she dreamed that she broke a clay water-jug!"

"Broke a water-jug? Why, that's inconvenient perhaps, but why does she look so sad? Surely a dream is only a dream."

"No, Ah Muan. Not this dream. It is a warning. When one dreams of breaking a water-jug, it means that some member of the family will surely die."

Juan tried to comfort his friends without success. The Gods had spoken. Ah Puch, God of Death, could be heard ringing his tiny metal bells above the thatched roof.

Again Ah Che murmured sorrowfully. "Some member of this family will die. I wonder which of us it will be?"

CHAPTER 15

Juan, Ah Che and Ah Wech went to the field early the next day. Hard work made the time pass quickly and it made them forget the warning dream. On the way home, Ix Cum met them at the edge of the village, her face anxious and strained, both hands up to her mouth. She saw them, saw in a glance that all three were safe, and her face relaxed into a smile.

"Hunab Ku! You are all safe! Now, all is well, and I can laugh at my dream. Come to your house, my man. Ix Koben waits with your bath in the other house, son Muan."

"Thank you, mother." Ix Cum's face softened at his answer.

Inside, Ix Koben stood beside a narrow, wooden tub filled with steaming water.

"Greetings, Ah Muan. Did the work go well today? Give me your cloak."

"Straight be your road, dear one. Yes, the work was good.

It's better still to find you here, but you need not make my bath. You won't be beaten if the water isn't hot, Ix Koben," Juan said, teasing.

Ix Koben smiled. Juan referred to the law that a husband could beat his wife if the daily bath weren't ready and sufficiently hot. Juan undressed and grunted with pleasure as the hot water soothed away the fatigue of the day. Flies hummed as they flew around the browning underside of the thatched roof. Steam from the bath drifted upward. Except for doves calling from the distance, the bath hour was a time of quiet. Through the open door the waving jungle foliage was a backdrop for familiar objects. Juan surrendered to drowsiness.

Suddenly he roused himself and listened. Ix Koben was busy with his clothing near the bed.

"Ix Koben, did I hear Ix Cum call my name?" he asked.

"Yes. I heard it. Perhaps food is ready. I'll go see."

Juan finished his bath alone, and since there was no repetition of the call, he dismissed it from his mind. As he walked out the door of his hut, he was thinking only of the refreshing power of a hot bath and clean clothes, and of the good meal awaiting him. As he stepped through to the ground, a heavy weight fell on him, and he went down under the hands of many men. Before he knew what had happened, his arms were tied behind him. He was pulled to his feet, and surrounded by a dozen soldiers. Only then did he see Ix Koben and Ix Cum struggling in the grasp of other soldiers. Ah Che argued with an officer. As soon as Juan was secured, the women were released. Both wept. Ah Che and Ah Wech looked sullen and angry. The officer approached Juan.

"What does this mean?" demanded Juan.

"You have been chosen by the City Council for sacrifice to the Feathered Serpent."

The familar scene was clear in every detail in Juan's mind. He heard Ix Koben's sob at the words. The curious villagers at the fence murmured loudly. Dully, hardly taking in the disaster, Juan felt himself being led down the path to Uxul. He was unarmed, his hands were tied, no chance of escape occurred, and soon they reached the city.

He was taken to the temple and led with pomp—hands untied—through halls and corridors. They stopped before a door painted with the symbol for Kukulkan. Two guards took up posts at the door when Juan and the officer went

into a luxurious room with cedar-panelled walls, and soft, finely woven cotton rugs on the stone floor.

"This is yours, Ah Muan," said the officer. "Anything you want, you may have. Slaves will be assigned to you. Your sleeping room is there. That garden is yours. Straight be your road."

The sound of sandaled feet died away and Juan was alone. On a table in the center of the room there were dishes of fruit and jars of wine. One side of the room was open and looked out on a high-walled private garden. Juan walked out into the garden at one side of which was a pool of water as bright blue as the sky, where lotus and water lilies floated. There were flowers everywhere.

While Juan sat and drank in this beauty, young girls came to him carrying gifts: feathered robes, bright headdresses, ornate sandals. One of the girls spoke, smiling at Juan, offering herself to him as well.

"Friend of the Feathered Serpent, we bring clothing befitting your position. A bath is ready."

After the bath a splendid meal was brought, and from the garden came the sound of flutes and singing voices. Juan was living as great lords lived, but it gave him no pleasure. His future was too short and too grim. He hardly tasted the food and barely noticed the beauty of the girls who served him.

The next day Juan learned why he was to be sacrificed to Kukulkan. The god had a white skin, so Juan would be a very appropriate offering to him. Surely, the winds would blow properly for the next burning of the fields. All this Juan learned from the high priest, who came to visit him. As the priest turned to go, Juan stopped him.

"Lord Serpent, I am told I may have anything I desire. Is that true?"

"Yes. What do you wish?"

"One of the women of the village of Ichmul is dear to me. I ask that she be brought here. Her name is Ix Koben."

"Good. She will come at once. May your road be straight."

When the door closed behind the priest, Juan dropped his pose of haughty carelessness. Before God! There might be a glimmer of hope! Would Ix Koben be allowed a second visit? Would she go against her gods, defy her religion, to help him?

It was late afternoon. Beyond the walls birds were begin-

ning their evening song when a guard ushered in Ix Koben. She wore a dress and petticoat heavily ornamented with embroidery. Around her neck was a chain of frangipani. One large blossom was fastened in her black hair. There were love and pride in her eyes and tears filled them as Juan took her in his arms.

"Ah Muan! Oh, my Hawk, why did the gods choose you? Why must I be always alone? But I am here. I am here, and we have tonight."

"How long can you stay, beloved?"

"I must go in the morning. I am not nobly born, so I am unworthy to live in these walls."

"But you may come again?" The hint of panic in Juan's voice, Ix Koben mistook for fear of their final parting. She smiled at Juan and smoothed his hair fondly.

"Yes, Ah Muan. If you want me again, I may come on the night before your day of glory. But I am only a woman of the village. Here, in the court, are great ladies, far more beautiful than I, who would gladly give love to the man chosen by the Feathered Serpent."

"To me you're the most beautiful of all, the greatest of ladies. I shall want you, never fear."

They sat quietly by the pool in the garden and watched night come. It was not until dark when they lay together spent of passion and at peace that Juan made his request.

"My love, when you come again, will you bring something to me?"

"Anything, my man. What do you wish?"

"My sword."

Juan felt Ix Koben stiffen slightly in his arms.

"Your sword? Why should you want your sword, Ah Muan?"

Juan knew that along with her love for him she also shared the deep religious beliefs of her people. She could never understand that Juan's paradise did not wait beyond the blood-smeared altar, that it was not glory to which he would go but to a forgotten grave.

"It is the metal thing I made," he said gently. "It is a thing of honor. I wish to wear it as I go to meet the Feathered Serpent. Then I will have it always at my side in heaven. That is the way with my people. I am a soldier, my love, and paradise would be less than paradise without my sword at my side."

She relaxed again into his arms. To her mystic, god-ridden mind the explanation was wholly reasonable.

"I will bring it, Ah Muan. I will bring it under my dress, and you will have to undress me to get your sword."

"A light barrier," said Juan, holding her close. "The sword will be the least important thing you bring."

When she left in the morning, hope remained behind her. Hope, a bare chance of survival, changed the world for Juan. He felt now that his plan, mad as it seemed, might work.

"St. James be with me," he prayed. "Make things go as I plan!"

The next day an impressive group came to the apartment. The mere sight of them frightened Juan. Had Ix Koben failed? Had she been kept from him? Then, the manner of their entrance reassured Juan: this was not the fatal day.

Juan remembered the True Man of Uxul, from the day when he had stood with five naked companions before him in his throne room. The True Man's face was still benign and wrinkled. He saluted Juan as he entered.

"Greetings, Ah Muan Kan. Are things here to your liking?"

"Straight be your road," replied Juan with dignity, determined to match the king's courtesy. "I have everything that I need. I am happy."

A second noble had come in with the king. He had a guard of a dozen soldiers in scarlet and green. He was tall for a Maya, and dressed magnificently: his sandals were gold covered, his loin cloth a mass of green and scarlet and his featherwork cloak of the same colors. He carried a shield of authority and a double-headed sceptre. From his scarlet headdress floated a three-foot panache of the brilliant green feathers of the quetzal bird, worn only by royalty. His skin was light, his thick black hair streaked with gray, and his face strong and handsome. The dark eyes looked interestedly at Juan, especially at his yellow hair.

Juan saluted him and he bowed without answering. After a moment the party left. Juan's servants told him that the strange king was Nachan Can, Lord of Chetumal, a city that lay far to the south on a large bay by the same name.

Before God! thought Juan. An effective method of meeting kings! I'll not recommend it. At least these folk are courteous, not like those bastards of the Santa Casa.

After his bath that night, priests came and painted him blue from head to foot. A chill of deeper fear came over him but he gave a wry grin as he looked at his blue, naked body.

"Hell's devils, but they're thorough! Wonder if it'll wear off?"

The priests confirmed his fears before they left. The sacrifice was set for the next morning.

Juan stepped to the table sweating as he poured a cup of wine. He drained it.

"Moncada and Castille!" he said aloud. It was like the night before a battle. He remembered a score of other nights, in Italy, at sea, in San Lucar. He remembered the light of campfires flickering on armor hung from tree branches and the purple night of Italy beyond, with strong walls to be stormed, standing against the sky.

"To El Chato!"

He wouldn't want his good friend to be sharing his danger, but, by God, it would be good to be with him again. Heaven hasten the day!

"To Ah Che." Again he filled his cup, and as he did so, a soft voice spoke behind him.

"Ah Muan, man, here is your woman."

Ix Koben was holding out her arms, and Juan was safe again, safe in the arms of love. He realized again that if love did not conquer death, there would be no men. He felt the hard, stiff outlines of his sword against her back.

"Thank God!" he said in Spanish.

They sat by the pool. Juan held Ix Koben close to him, and her warm body pushed death and danger away.

"My darling, my woman, remember what you said of the poor-me-one, the bird that cries in the night?"

"Yes, Golden Hawk. It is the soul of one who died in love, whose lover has not joined him. Until the lover dies the poor-me-one must haunt the jungle, crying his woe and loneliness to the night. I remember."

"When you hear a poor-me-one, Ix Koben, remember me. You will hear my voice in the night."

Twilight faded. The evening star, the Star That Carries the Sun on His Back, was silver against the pale blue sky. Night birds called and day birds twittered, preparing for sleep.

"The sword, Ah Muan, do you want your sword?"

"I want my sword," Juan whispered. He unfastened the girdle, and she lifted her body from the bench, so that he could remove the dress. She raised her arms, while he unveiled her round firm breasts, tautened by her upraised arms. His deerhide sword-belt lay between them, and he kissed

them as he unfastened it. She clasped his head in her arms and pressed his face to her softness.

Even when the night wind blew, they were still together by the pool. The wind ruffled its surface; the reflections of the stars were narrow quivering streaks of light. The sounds of the town died away. From far off in the jungle came the haunting cry of a poor-me-one. They lay in each other's arms, listening.

There was a light dew that morning. A caged bird shook its wings and complained of the sun's slowness, though there was a red glow in the east. Freshness lay upon the earth. The night had restored Juan. A knock sounded on the guarded door.

"Remember me when you hear the poor-me-one," Juan murmured to Ix Koben and a sob was his only answer.

The door closed behind her, a slight figure in the gray dawn. Juan slung the sword down his back under the short feathered jacket he would wear for the ceremony. The world he was only too likely to leave that day became a miracle of delight: he saw the beauty of a water jar for the first time, and there was a poignancy about everything that made it infinitely desirable to live. A chant sounded and a large group of men stopped outside Juan's door.

Soldiers entered and stood beside him. Before long, the procession to the sacrificial ceremony moved across the plaza through a crowd massed on both sides of a narrow lane marked off by banners.

Four youths came first, playing quick music on reed flutes. Then came the priests beating deer horns on sea turtle shells. They were followed by the drums and a guard of soldiers in their black and orange paint. Juan Moncada came next, followed by more soldiers. The crowd applauded as he passed by.

Juan kept his head up, seeing everything in a mist. For a moment he thought he saw Ah Che's face, but it was gone in a second. The steep stairway towered above them. Juan paused to look at the plaza, at the green and impersonal jungle beyond, at the white walls, the pyramids on all sides and the bright sky overhead.

He started up the steps. On either hand was a procession of carved gods and animals as he climbed. The steps were narrow and the risers high. A fresh breeze fanned Juan's face, and the sun began to feel warm on his shoulders as he reached the top. The jungle and the town finally were spread out below him.

Before him on the pyramid top was an open, pillared temple. The pillars were huge emerald and gold serpents, heads to the ground, the tails curved backward against the temple as an ornamental lintel. Braziers of incense gave up thin columns of aromatic smoke. Ah Taxmar Xiu, king of Uxul, stood side by side with Nachan Can. On the western side, lighted by the climbing sun, was the altar. Above it was the figure of Kukulkan. His nose was long and distorted, he was feathered, and he held a headless hawk in his right hand. With his left hand he scattered round hailstones, and his feathered headdress was torn as if by a strong wind.

The altar itself was a round, blue, blood-smeared stone. It was convex, designed to raise the chest of the victim above the rest of his body. A chant had begun as soon as the party halted on the top. Juan thought he saw a look of pity in the eyes of Nachan Can.

Juan stood nearly alone. Across the temple was a file of soldiers with the four chacs grouped behind them. The evil spirits were dispelled, and the Chilam raised his hands in prayer. The only Being present was Kukulkan, the Feathered Serpent. Now was the time!

As Juan reached behind his shoulder his hand felt numb. There was a lump in his stomach, and he held his breath. He unfastened the cloak with his left hand and it fell to the stone. He took hold of the carved handle of the sword, clasped it, and with a shout raised it high. He leapt across the temple floor, the bright steel gleaming in his hand!

"Moncada and Castille!" he shouted. Then remembered to add: "Kukulkan! Kukulkan!"

He heard shouts rise up, heard the chant falter and saw the startled soldiers plunge to meet him, weapons ready.

CHAPTER 16

Juan's sweeping glance covered a scene he was long to remember: Nachan Can's calm, the high priest's mouth open in a shout for an instant that seemed to last so long that motion itself was frozen. Then movement returned, and two soldiers were upon Juan. The first was tall and heavy with a white crescent scar on his cheek. He carried a shield and his wooden, obsidian-edged sword was poised to strike. Juan

slipped aside, the sword missed, and the soldier's momentum carried him past Juan. The second soldier attacked. Juan met the blow of his sword, edge to edge, and his steel sword cut his opponent's in two pieces. Juan's parry had carried his sword above his left shoulder. As he swung it back, hilt first, the heavy pommel caught the unarmed man on the temple and dropped him unconscious. Juan was ready then to parry another thrust of the first soldier and his parry was so carefully aimed that the obsidian-edged sword tinkled to the stone. Juan recovered, lunged quickly and drove his sword through the chest of this man. Above the clamor, Juan heard the high priest's shrill cry. Juan saw soldiers raising their spears as he rushed across the temple to the altar, flung his sword to the stones and shouted:

"Feathered One! Kukulkan! Why am I unworthy?"

It was not difficult for him to put anguish in his voice, since he half-expected to feel spear points in his back. But the high priest cried a warning, and silence fell on the pyramid, so that the roar of the crowd below could be heard. Juan turned from the altar to face the priests and soldiers. To one side he could see the soldier on his hands and knees, coughing his life away.

"The Feathered Serpent took my arm! He put that weapon in my hand. He told me I was unworthy and made me kill the man with the scar!" Juan held his clenched right hand in the air, slowly opened it and stared at it raptly. "It was not *that* hand that did it. It was the hand of Kukulkan!"

The dying man coughed. Juan folded his arms and bent his head. He had made his throw; now to see the game's result. The high priest stared at him and the king of Uxul had lost his look of benevolence.

The high priest made a motion to the chacs and pointed at the dying soldier who was now flat on the floor, silent in the spreading pool of his own blood. The assistants picked him up and laid him on his back on the altar. The sacrificial priest came forward with the obsidian knife, and Juan sickened a moment later at sight of the raw, quivering heart on a golden dish.

The True Man of Uxul confronted Juan, his face working with anger.

"Ah Muan Kan, you have been turned away by the God! A great sin must have blackened your heart to make it unsuitable to Kukulkan. You have your life, but you are still a slave." He spoke to one of the officers. "See that this slave is taken to the quarries at once."

"I hear and obey, True Man," said the officer as he started for Juan.

Juan looked past the officer to see Nachan Can walking toward him, Juan's steel sword in his right hand. He spoke in a calm voice which had power and authority.

"One moment, Ah Taxmar. A word with you, please."

"What would you have, Nachan Can?" asked the king of Uxul in a voice that still quivered. He stopped and steadied his voice with an effort. "This is a great event, my friend from Chetumal, the second of its kind here within a short time. Forgive my confusion and discourtesy. I await your words."

"I beg of you, Ah Taxmar Xiu, give me this slave. I have watched carefully the manner in which he used this weapon and I have a use for him."

Juan held his breath. The high priest drew in his with an angry hiss. The scowl on the face of the sacrificial priest was visible even under the blue paint. A restless murmur rose from the crowd below.

"The wishes of the king's guest are to be fulfilled, Nachan Can. When you came here I told you whatever you chose was yours. My words were not for the wind. The man is yours. Take him, and may he serve you well."

Nachan Can bowed.

"The gratitude of Chetumal is yours, Ah Taxmar. This is true friendship. It will always be returned by me and my people." He paused. "Ah Cuat! Take this man to the barracks."

Two soldiers painted scarlet and green flanked Juan and a few seconds later they descended the narrow steps Juan had climbed so fearfully only a little while before. Now his knees were weak with relief. The crowd's roar deafened Juan. The soldiers pushed a way through the crowd to one of the barracks near the palace. Juan slumped on a bed, covered his face with his hands and closed his eyes.

Juan drank deeply that night after permission to return to the village had been denied him. His hand still trembled. He'd been near death before, but the memory of the curved knife, the blood-caked altar and the beating heart on the dish of gold had unnerved him.

His sleep was troubled, and the lost and hopeless cry of a poor-me-one sighed through the dreams. He awoke with relief to the day.

"You are ordered to the presence of Nachan Can. Hasten; he waits," a messenger announced after breakfast.

Nachan Can was attended by priests and soldiers. Soft music came from a nearby room. Two boys swayed brilliant fans above his head. Juan bowed deeply to the king after he had pulled a cloak across his shoulders: a commoner's bare shoulders were disrespectful in the presence of royalty. Nachan Can gestured toward the door, and in a moment he and Juan were alone except for one officer. The king looked into Juan's eyes.

"Ah Muan Kan, I saw you pull this sword from your clothing." He lifted the sword, then replaced it on the bench. "The Feathered Serpent may have given you wise counsel but he didn't put this weapon in your hands. Where did you get it?"

"I made it, True Man."

"Good. Can you make more?"

"Yes."

"Good." The king sounded pleased. He smiled at his officer and spoke again to Juan.

"My people live by the sea. We have heard of the white men who come from the East. We have heard of their numbers, their magic, their weapons and their cruelty. My soothsayers and my own thoughts tell me that some day they will come to our land. We need new weapons and new knowledge.

"You come from the East. You have a white skin and yet are now a Maya. I give you your freedom. I want you to come as a soldier of my bodyguard to Chetumal. I want you to give us knowledge and weapons with which to fight the men of the East. I have had a dream in which I was shown that a white-skinned man with yellow hair would help my children avoid great misfortune. I think you are that man. When I first saw your face, Hunab Ku whispered to me that you were a man of good for my people.

"What say you? Will you come with me and be a shield to my people and a teacher to my soldiers?"

Juan kept the pleasure out of his face and the relief out of his voice as he answered by asking a question.

"What will my station be, True Man?"

Nachan Can's face went a little blank at the question. He had expected a readier agreement.

"Only a soldier at first, Ah Muan, but a free man. When you have made some of these swords, you will become an underofficer. Then, if you train my men well, if I am satisfied with what you do, I will make you an hereditary war captain."

For himself Juan could not have wished more, but he was thinking of Valera.

"You make me happy, my lord Nachan Can. But I have still one more question. I have a friend, a white man with red hair. He is a wise man and a great soldier and is now somewhere in the jungle, a fugitive from many enemies. He will be a strong and ready right hand, True Man. I wish to seek him with warriors, deliver him from any danger and bring him with me to your city."

Nachan Can smiled.

"Hah! A favor willingly granted, Ah Muan. Tomorrow I will send a hundred men to search the whole land. They will find your friend and bring him to Chetumal. You will come with me."

"But, True Man, I myself would search for this man, my friend. Allow me to stay and help in the search."

Nachan Can's expression hardened, but he spoke softly.

"I have spoken. You will come with me to Chetumal. Your friend will be found. There will be no more words!"

Juan recognized his authority. Further protest might lose all he had gained. He bowed and stepped back, and the king's face relaxed slowly into a smile.

"Here, man of Chetumal." He handed Juan's sword to him, hilt first. "May you use this with good fortune. Ah Huitz Tupan!"

The officer stepped forward. He was gray-mustached and gray-haired; his nose was like an eagle's beak, and his mouth was as firm as his namesake, The Mountain. He was a slender, sturdy man, scarred with life and war. His sharp eyes were on Juan as the king spoke again.

"Ah Muan is to be dressed and equipped as a soldier of our bodyguard. He is to march close to me, for I may wish to speak to him as we travel."

"I hear and obey, True Man," said Ah Huitz, the War Captain of Chetumal. "Greetings, Ah Muan Kan. Welcome to the army of Chetumal. Come with me."

Pungent oil and a bath removed the blue paint. Juan's chest was painted scarlet and green, and he was given a plain loincloth, high-lashed sandals, a cloak embroidered in red and green, and a round shield with Kukulkan's emblem. A throwing stick and knife hung at his belt with the sword. A six-foot spear with an obsidian head and a tuft of feathers above the grip completed his equipment.

He was a soldier and a free man again! He felt the knowl-

edge enfold him like a warm cloak. Immediately he liked his fellow soldiers who were cheerful, sturdy and friendly. They were really the corn planters of the villages, equipped with spears and arrows, completely unpretentious. They welcomed him and offered him a place in their games. He had no mind for games. He was possessed with the desire to see Ix Koben, so he went at once to the captain of his company.

"I would visit my friends in Ichmul and get my belongings. May I have leave?"

"Hah! That's every new soldier's idea. First he says: 'When do I eat?'; then he says: 'May I have leave?' I see you're a true soldier. Go. Report to me before the sun is above the trees tomorrow."

Juan grew happier with every step he took on the path to Ichmul. Home and love were at the end of that path. He thought of Ix Koben's joy. He would make her his wife. Not now, but after he had risen in the service of Nachan Can. That was certain. When he was a captain with his own house he would return for her and they would be man and wife.

There was the mora tree towering above the papalna. The village was quiet because the men were in the fields. It was a little after noon. From each hut came the cheerful, busy sound of housewives at their chores. Here was the house of Ah Che. This was home! The two small children stared in wonder at his green and scarlet.

Juan entered the house. Ix Cum stared, dropped the stone rolling pin, and then ran sobbing into his arms. Why was she crying?

"Ah Muan, Ah Muan, my son! You have come back to us. We heard from the Tree that you still lived. Will you stay with us?"

"No, mother. I am off to Chetumal for service under its king. But I'll be back. Where is Ix Koben? I'd like some love to remember on the road to Chetumal. Where is my woman?"

Tears filled her dark eyes.

"That I should be the one to tell you! Ah Muan, when Ix Koben left you yesterday, she thought you were dead. She said to me: 'The soul of Ah Muan shall not cry with loneliness in the night.' I did not know what she meant. Later Ah Che found her.

"She is dead! She hanged herself in her house. She waits for you in paradise, Ah Muan."

When Juan recovered from the shock he was in the forest,

walking toward the frangipani bush where they had made love that first night. He remembered her eyes, the white blossoms between her breasts. He heard her voice.

"They tell that the poor-me-one is the soul of one in love who died alone, crying alone in the night because her lover is not in her arms. If I could not have you, Ah Muan, I think that I should cry so."

The scent of frangipani was strong. No bird cried in the stillness of the forest afternoon.

When Juan reported to his captain the next morning, the officer looked at him curiously as he removed his name from the list of those on leave.

For two days Juan heard and saw nothing of what went on. Each night he slept sodden with wine. His new comrades heard of his misfortune and were roughly kind. On the third day he went again to Ichmul, and the first frenzy of grief settled to a constant ache. Ah Che was the same jolly man, and over pipes they had a long talk. When Juan left, he carried Ah Che's favorite pipe, the one decorated with red feathers, with him. He also carried a pouch of good tobacco and a loincloth embroidered with the Xoxhil Chui—the threads that are counted. It was white with a file of birds and flowers on the border around the waist. On the front flap, which hung to his knees, was embroidered a tall cornstalk with golden tassels.

When, finally, Juan had turned his back on the hut and the people in front of it, memories carried him back to the day when he and El Chato had ridden from the Casa de Moncada to Italy and war. That had been his first departure from home.

Juan's troop captain now was a grizzled, middle-aged soldier. He was called The Knife, Ah Tok. When he stumped into the barracks that evening after Juan's return, he grinned at the men and announced:

"Well, you loungers, work begins. Tomorrow we start for Chetumal. By Ek Chuah! High time! Else the lot of you would turn into wine jars. Everyone must be in the barracks by the black watch tonight. Equipment must be in good order, sandals mended and clothes clean for an early start. Any man not prepared will get a touch of the lash when we're home again."

A hubbub filled the room. The men who had already gone to bed got to their feet and readjusted their loincloths.

Rough jokes and vulgar remarks were hurled back and forth across the room.

"Ah Bruk, let's have a last evening with those two young cornstalks who live by the cenote. You'll soon be back with the old Bat, so you'd better."

"Right you are, Planting Stick. By Chac, friends, there's a man aptly named. One moment, old one. My cloak, and I'm with you."

The soldiers spent this last evening as guests of the town. The room quieted. Juan was left alone stretched on his bed, staring morosely at the white ceiling.

The morning mist was just beginning to vanish and the cheerful voices of women were sounding from the cenote as the soldiers of Nachan Can lined up by twos across the plaza. Each man carried his weapons, a gourd of water, personal belongings and a small supply of food. They stood informally in place, talking, laughing and looking forward with pleasure to going home.

Juan stood cose to Ah Tok at the center. Nearby were three litters of carved wood with cotton canopies. They were for Nachan Can, his daughter Ix Pat Nachan and the war captain. A hundred bearers, loaded with food and pavilions, were at the other end of the line. Curious, laughing townspeople gathered nearby. Jests and farewells were exchanged.

A soldier named Ah Chacah stood at Juan's left. He leaned his spear against the palace wall and then eased the weight of the pack on his back on it.

"The True Man should come soon. I'm glad we march near him. We'll see anything of interest that happens and, by Ixchel, whenever I lay eye on the princess Ix Pat, my heart is gladdened. Have you seen her yet, Ah Muan?"

"No. I've heard much talk of her, always full of respect and admiration. Is she worthy of it?"

"Aye. A true daughter of Nachan Can. And I tell you, white man, we are lucky in our ruler. In Chetumal there is justice. Not like some of these towns. But here! He comes."

The lines straightened. Men retrieved spears, and all noise stopped. As the king walked down the ranks, spear points were lowered in salute. When the royal party passed Juan, he dipped his spear, but he almost forgot to raise it again when he saw the princess.

She was in a white robe spangled with the color of elaborate embroidery, and she wore a flowing headdress of egret

plumes. She was small and slender, and even by contrast with the feathers, her face was light: a clear cream-gold. Her dark hair showed a glint of red and as she passed close before him, Juan saw that her eyes were large, gray and beautiful. He released his breath audibly as he became fully aware of her extraordinary beauty.

"What did I say?" murmured Ah Chacah from the corner of his mouth.

The spears came to the vertical again. Nachan Can stepped into his litter, stretched himself on the cushions and lit a cigar. Ah Chacah's nose twitched at the sight. Ah Huitz helped Ix Pat into her litter, entered his own, and the long column swung into the road leading from the city.

At the city's edge they struck into one of the broad, level stone roads built by the Maya. Juan examined it with interest. It was a far better road than most of those in Spain. It was built six feet above the earth on a foundation of large limestone blocks fitted carefully together. Smaller blocks made up the next layer and crushed fragments rolled and pressed smooth were on top. Once they met a road-rolling gang, some forty men pushing and pulling a large stone roller over the road.

They stopped for only half an hour at noon, and pushed on in spite of the heat.

"Why all this haste?" asked Juan.

"Perhaps the king wants to reach the high ridge before stopping for the night. There is a good well, and among the high trees, the ticks are not as bad as in the bush. Let night hurry. This pack has grown heavy beyond all reason."

They were traveling to the west, and at last the setting sun shone into their eyes as they walked. There was little talk. The sun's glare was intense on the white limestone road and made their eyes ache. The road began to climb and high trees supplanted the scrub growth of the flatlands. They reached the summit, turned abruptly from the stone road and into the twilight of great trees. The trunks of the ceibas soared to the sky, the straight sapodillo trees beside them. Orchids were abundant. Some trees were entirely covered with white and orange flowers. The foliage made a thick roof above their heads, so thick that only an occasional ray of sunlight penetrated. It was cooler and very quiet. Sandals made no noise on the jungle mold.

The column halted in a clearing next to a large cenote whose clear water reflected the sky and the clouds touched with the colors of sunset. In a few minutes the pavilions were

erected. Ix Pat's was beneath a sapodillo covered with a vine bearing tiny red flowers like endless strings of small lanterns. The soldiers built frond shelters for themselves. They stayed clear of the cenote while the princess and her women bathed at its edge. They were followed in turn by the nobles, the priests, the soldiers and, last, the bearers.

Stars came with the dark, and fires threw dancing light among the trunks of trees and the foliage. Tortillas baked in the ashes, and a mouth-watering smell of broiling meat drifted from the cooking fire of the king.

"We must keep alert tomorrow," said Ah Chacah. "With fortune we might get a deer, or perhaps some turkeys. Then we, too, will have meat. Oh, well. So long as I have tortillas, my belly is content."

Fires slowly died, and fireflies dotted the darkness. A rollicking song came from around one of the fires. In the distance a poor-me-one called. Juan sat and stared at the glowing coals of one fire. Where did Ix Koben wander tonight? Where was that life, that warmth that made her a joy to a man? Surely not buried in the ground with her body. That was unthinkable. It had not come from the flesh.

Perhaps her own belief was the best to accept. If so, then that warm spirit cried in the forest, existed in the form of a large dark bird that haunted the darkness and whose cry now quavered again in the distance. Juan could almost hear his name in that sad cry.

Early morning in the forest satisfied some longing hidden deep in Juan. After so long a time in the village, essentially happy though the time had been, the change and the march intoxicated him. His longing for Ix Koben remained along with the haunting knowledge that he was leaving Valera behind. He consoled himself about Valera. Even now a hundred men searched the jungle for him. Nachan Can could have done no more, and Juan was sure he was sincere in his wish to add Valera to his followers.

"Mind the che-chem tree," the word was passed back.

"The what?"

"The che-chem tree. That one, see? With oily-looking dark leaves. See that yellowish sap? If a drop of that touches the skin, it leaves a blister. A drop in your eye would blind you."

"Holy Mary! Are there many like that?"

"Not many. But some. There—that bush is nearly as bad. See those hairs on the branches? They fly off in the wind. Wherever they touch you, it itches for hours. That's the

chi-can bush. A cursed fool put a handful of the hairs in my bed one night. By Ah Puch! I lost a lot of weight during the next few suns from scratching day and night. I revenged myself though. I caught a gourd full of soldier ants, wrapped them in a leaf and put them in his bed one night when he planned to entertain a comely widow. You should have heard that duet of screeches! They leaped together into the cenote and the whole town came out and laughed!"

By God! thought Juan. I see that one watches his step among these folk!

One night while they sat talking and smoking around the fires after a good meal, a jaguar roared from the nearby jungle.

"Balam! The jaguar god is close!"

Men peered nervously into the black jungle and built the fires higher. Jaguars seldom attacked men unprovoked, but it did happen. The deep, hoarse cry sounded again, half growl, half cough. Once more the jaguar sounded his displeasure at this intrusion and then there was an uneasy silence.

The march had continued for only an hour the next morning when excited shouts came from the head of the column. The shouts were mingled with the roar of an enraged jaguar. Spears were raised to the ready, men dropped packs to be free for action, and Nachan Can and his war captain took strung bows from their attendants and hurried ahead. Soon the word was passed back along the line. The jaguar had appeared snarling in the trail. A dozen arrows and spears had hit the target. It had been lucky that the jaguar hadn't charged. When the march was presently resumed, the king and war chief stayed in front, hoping for another chance at the great cat.

An hour passed, men relaxed, and talk recommenced. Surely Ah Balam was far away, though it was unusual for a jaguar to be so easily frightened off. The men were brave and experienced fighters, but they felt definite relief.

A gold bird chanted from a mora tree. Insects hummed and from the leafy roof overhead came the chatter of monkeys. Without warning, with hardly the shake of a leaf to foretell his coming, the jaguar leaped, roaring, from a thick bush by the trail! The guard beside Ix Pat was struck down and the jaguar landed squarely on the litter of the princess. Her scream rang clear through the horrified shouts of men. Juan was close. He leaped forward, cursing, with his heavy sword in his hand. The litter was upset, and the bearers

scrambled for safety. Ix Pat was entangled in the litter, and she screamed again. Just as the jaguar reached a blood-spattered snarling face through the litter's curtains, Juan buried his sword in its neck. A great paw swung, the blow was half-deflected by the smashed palanquin, but it smacked home against Juan and he sank into a spinning darkness.

Voices sounded through a lifting mist and Juan felt pain. His head was heavy and felt loose on his shoulders. He opened his eyes to a ring of anxious faces. He lay on the ground with his head on a cushion. A priest knelt over him and blood spattered the ground. Ix Pat crouched by the side of the priest, her face pale. Ah Tok was swearing as he held Juan's arm. Juan managed a smile.

"The jaguar. Where is he? Did we . . . ?"

Ah Tok answered, "He's dead. There he is."

The circle opened and Juan saw the spotted gold and black jaguar lying by the overturned litter. He staggered to his feet. His head was spinning, his chest ached, a bandage covered the side of his face and he was stiff and sore. His left arm hung numb and useless at his side.

Nachan Can approached him and his face was no longer expressionless. He took Juan's good hand.

"Ah Muan Kan! Kukulkan indeed gave me a true dream! You have saved my daughter who means more to me than I can tell. You are no longer a warrior!"

With the words he removed his feathered cloak and draped it over Juan's aching shoulders. Then, among murmurs of excitement and approval, the king removed his quetzal headdress. Impressively he put it on Juan's head.

"Ah Muan Kan. You are now a member of the house of Itza. You are my son. I pronounce you a noble, a hereditary war captain. Thanks be to the Feathered One who has brought me a son!"

CHAPTER 17

The bay of Chetumal was pink with reflected sunrise and through the city the east wind carried the clean smell of salt water to mingle with those of wood smoke, flowers and jungle. Banners flapped in the wind. The pyramids were pink on their seaward sides, and they and the temples were tallest.

Other buildings were smaller in scale, from the low spacious palace and the villas of the nobles to the barracks and the cottages of the workers.

The House of the Pigeons was a graceful structure, half stone and stucco, half wooden pavilion, ringed by gardens and the sea. The banner above it was black with three golden hawks. It was the house of Juan Moncada, now a noble of Chetumal.

Juan's bedroom had white stucco walls on three sides and a ceiling and floor of cedar. The bed coverings were of feather work and fine cotton, though the bed itself was no different from the one he had at Ah Che's. The fourth side of the room was open to blue water, the sky and the garden.

A servant entered the room, stood looking toward the bed and spoke as Juan yawned and turned toward him with a smile.

"Greetings, my lord Hawk."

"Good morning, Toxcal. How is the day?"

"My Lord Sun smiles. The wind is from the east. It will be cool."

As the man spoke he presented a tray upon which was a large wooden cup carved with the leaves and pods of the cocoa plant. It was filled with a frothy mixture of chocolate beaten with wild honey and vanilla.

Juan drank the chocolate, draped a cloak over his shoulders and walked through the garden to the sea. The wet sand was cool to his feet, and when he dropped the cloak, the east wind was refreshing to his body. He dived into the clear water and opened his eyes to look at a dim, strange world of waving plants and gliding fish, a world tantalizingly beautiful but untouchable.

Toxcal had a clay bowl of hot water, soap and an obsidian razor ready when Juan returned. Juan shaved, using a disc of polished silver for a mirror, and dressed. He ate in the garden. On the white cotton cloth were laid tortillas, fresh fruit, eggs and chocolate. From the tamarind and wild mango trees mocking birds and orioles sang, black finches and yellow kiskadees called from the palm trees at the water's edge.

Juan faced the sea as he ate, relaxed and pleased with his surroundings, delighted to be a free man again. When he finished eating, a young girl came toward him. She was naked except for a white skirt and a scarlet kerchief draped over her breasts. She handed him the pipe, his present from Ah Che, and held a small brazier near him. A bundle of sticks from the catzin tree were in a cup suspended on one side of

the brazier. Juan touched a stick to the hot coals. It burst into flame, and he lit his pipe.

When Juan stretched his arms above his head, he felt only a slight pain in the one that had been broken by the jaguar. He had journeyed the rest of the way to Chetumal in a litter, feverish from his wounds. Now, however, the priests declared him cured, and today he would start north to search for Valera. Nachan Can had agreed without protest that as soon as his wounds were healed, he could take two hundred men and join in the hunt for his friend.

Juan looked about him impatiently. Ah Tok should be coming to tell him the troop was ready to march. The sun was high. Juan's frown vanished when a red hibiscus blossom reminded him of Ix Pat. He had seen a good deal of her in the past weeks. Through her socially correct air of demure shyness he could sometimes get a flash of her merry spirit and inquiring mind. The memory of her warmed him. He had bathed once in the sea with the royal family, Ix Pat included. She had worn a short dress which, when plastered to her slim body by the water, had revealed its perfection to Juan.

Ah! There was the Knife. Juan went to meet him.

"Greetings, Ah Muan. The troop is ready."

"Good!" said Juan. "Let us start!"

They traveled fast, and in two weeks reached Uxul where Juan made his headquarters. He received all the deference accorded royalty. He sent a hundred men in small parties to join the search. For weeks there was no definite news, and he began to have doubts of ever finding Valera. The searchers had uncovered only a few traces of El Chato. He was traveling with a woman, but the last news of him was already old. Each day added to Juan's fears. Ah Tok, now genuinely fond of him, began to grow gloomy. The Knife knew there were many dangers in the jungle.

While he waited, Juan visited his friends in Ichmul. They were pleased with his good fortune, but welcomed him shyly at first. The shyness vanished when they found him unchanged. He spent a day with Ah Che and his son in the field, and memories of Ix Koben came back strongly to him. Her ghost walked for Juan in the cheerful village: he woke once in the hut of Ah Che crying in the night. As he lay there, the voice of a poor-me-one sounded in the darkness close by.

At last, one day when hope was very low, a detachment of his men arrived. Their officer rushed to Juan's

quarters gray with fatigue, dust covered and scratched by jungle thorns. Valera had been captured by soldiers of Lacanha, he reported, and the king of Lacanha was holding him for the king of Tulum. He had learned this in Tulum, and then slipped into the jungle with his detachment. When he left, the king of Tulum was preparing to send a noble with twenty soldiers for Valera.

Juan assembled his hundred men and conferred with Ah Tok and Ah Chacah over a map. Lacanha was closer to Uxul than to Tulum. If they hurried they could reach Valera before his enemies. Juan knew that, if necessary, he would attack and kill the men of Tulum in order to rescue Valera. But that would mean war which he wanted to avoid.

"Ah Tok, I've heard that the priests make a substance from the leaves of the cocoa bush that will put a man to sleep. Is it so? Good! Get a large supply for me at once. You, Ah Chacah, see that our bearers carry a litter and a large quantity of wine. Now according to the map, the trail from here to Lacanha crosses the one from Tulum some miles from our destination."

"That is so."

"We must reach the spot where the trails cross before the men of Tulum. Get the wine and the drug, and prepare the troop for a hard march. We're leaving in half an hour."

After several days and nights of hard travel the weary troop came out onto the trail which ran from Tulum to Lacanha. A small village lay at the intersection.

"Greetings, farmer," shouted Ah Tok. "Have men from Tulum passed by here in the last few days?"

The village chief shook his head.

"Not for ten suns, Loud One. Why? Is there trouble ahead?"

"Trouble? No. You are too suspicious. They are friends, and we wish to see them. Straight be your road, friend."

"And yours also," returned the batabob.

Juan led his men down the trail from Tulum to the south until they found a well, shaded, cool and pleasant. The pavilion was raised, guards were set, and Juan and his troop rested. Many times that day Juan, unable to sleep because of his anxiety, looked down the trail for the party that didn't come. He rubbed his tired legs and thought of Valera, of his bigness, his fiery red hair, his hard face and his soft heart. Above all he thought of the love between them, the unslacking friendship. By God! It would be good to see El Chato and to know they were together again to stay.

Just before sunset the steady evening breeze blew through the jungle, whipping the long moss in the wind and bringing a breath of mingled hot and cold air. Chacoloci called from the jungle, repeating their name. Frogs awoke in the cenote. Night fell, blue and deep, and the fireflies were pinpoints of light in the jungle.

"They won't come tonight," said Ah Tok. "That suits me. The men need rest."

"And me," said Ah Chacah. "Ek Chuah! The afternoon seems only to have left me stiffer than before."

"Perhaps tomorrow," said Juan.

All the next day the trail was empty except for occasional groups of corn planters walking to their fields morning and afternoon. During the next night uneasiness crept over Juan but he pushed it back as best he could. After all, the men of Tulum had no reason for haste.

Four hours after the next noon, when heat was heaviest over the jungle, plumes were sighted, tossing spots of color far down the trail. A slanting ray of sun found a way through the trees and flashed on spear points. Juan rose to his feet, his heart pounding.

"They come," he said, keeping his voice calm. "Toxcal, my cloak and headdress."

Juan put on his ceremonial regalia and stood by the pavilion, whose raised side faced the trail. On the ground inside men were rapidly laying a feast. The party came closer until the outline of a litter and the shapes of men could be distinguished. The men in the lead emerged from the shade near the well. They blinked at the strong light and looked over the camp by the water with envy. As the litter came close to Juan, he stepped before it, raising his hand in salute.

"Greetings, men of Tulum!" he cried. "We have wine cool from the well and a feast is spread. Stop and eat with us."

The litter halted, curtains were drawn aside and a round, sleepy face peered through. The black eyes studied Juan and his officers. They widened at the royal green. The officer scrambled out of his litter.

"May your road be straight, prince of Chetumal. Your words are sweet to my ears, and my throat is dry for the wine of friendship."

He advanced, adjusting his headdress as he did so, a short, round man, full jowled, puffing in the heat.

"Men call me Ah Muan Kan, noble of Chetumal. How shall I call you?"

"Ah Jaleb, noble of Tulum. It is good to hear your words.

I shall halt here tonight. I ask that you grant me time for a bath and I will join you with great willingness."

When Ah Jaleb and his men returned from their baths, wine was brought and the feasting began. When the men of Tulum had drunk enough wine to dull their senses, fresh gourds were brought in. In those put before the men of Tulum, a quantity of the drug made from cocoa leaves had been stirred. As soon as one gourd was emptied, another was brought. Juan and his men kept pace with their guests, but their wine was mixed with water and undrugged.

"By Ah Puch! But this is fine wine, and a brother's welcome!" shouted Ah Jaleb. "Curse me, my friend, but my head spins already."

"You need more wine, noble guest," said Juan.

He grinned as Ah Jaleb tilted the gourd again. He was thinking of the night in San Lucar when he and Valera had poured wine and brandy down the throats of the two sailors whose papers they wanted. It was that memory which hatched this plan.

At the foot of the assembly a soldier of Tulum slipped sideways, coming to rest with his plumed head on the remains of the feast, gently snoring. At a small gesture from Ah Tok a man of Chetumal did likewise. Soon men began to slump over by twos and threes. Ah Jaleb was one of the last to go, but before long he, too, slept noisily, and the sound of snores drowned the song of the frogs in the well.

"Now," said Juan. "Hasten. It is time."

Twenty of Juan's best men took the shields, weapons, and plumes of the Tulum soldiers. Juan took the red and blue feathered cloak and headdress of Ah Jaleb. Four bearers took the palanquin as Juan and his men trotted off down the trail. Their torches flared with the rhythm of their running.

Behind them Ah Chacah turned and surveyed the pavilion full of drunken, naked men. He grinned.

"Keep the drugged wine ready, Ah Bec. If a man stirs, pour it down his throat. We must keep them asleep for twenty-four hours. Ah Puch! From the amount of wine these men have consumed, I'd say they'll sleep a week. Besides, they're full of the sleeping drug. We've drawn the easy detail."

Juan led his men through the jungle, past the little village at the crossing. Cigars glowed from one porch, but no one spoke as they trotted by. In the jungle the torches lit up the webs of leaves and vines. Occasionally the torchlight showed the eyes of animals. Once a heavy thrashing in the bush

meant that one of the larger animals of the night was in pursuit of its prey, and a faintly musky smell filled the air. A league from Lacanha they halted, extinguished torches, and lay down, huddled in their cloaks, beside the trail, leaving one man to watch.

At dawn they made a quick breakfast and checked and cleaned their clothing and equipment to remove all traces of their night march. When they started again, Juan rode in the litter, cigar lit, making a grand show of haughtiness to the knots of corn planters going to work.

They went through another village where children shouted at them as they passed. A man ran full speed down the trail ahead of them: Lacanha would be notified of their coming. An impish urchin, naked as a finger, shouldered a cane spear and walked alongside the column for a hundred paces ignoring the laughs and shouted questions of the men.

From a turn in the trail Juan saw gleaming white stone ahead. His suspense almost choked him, and he threw away the cigar. He and his men were met at the town's edge by a priest, a captain and a dozen men. Juan saw them near the trail's end. Beyond them he could see the pyramids, barracks and palaces. Smoke from cooking fires lay in a horizontal screen above the town almost obscuring the temples on top of the pyramids.

The captain's hand was up in the salute as he and the priest advanced toward Juan. The priest threw holy water in front of Juan's palanquin with his aspergillum. Juan swung from the litter, and, with Ah Tok, went to meet them.

"Greetings, men of Tulum," said the captain. "All in this city is yours."

"The One Only God rejoices to see his children in peace and friendship," added the priest.

Juan replied, keeping the haughty reserve proper to a noble met by those of lesser rank. After the first exchange of civilities he inquired brusquely:

"Where is the man?"

"He and the woman are in the cages," replied the captain, a little surprised at this briskness. His scarred face imprinted itself on Juan's memory: the black gap of a missing tooth, the tuft of white and yellow feathers in the black hair and the design on the deep chest. Juan's uneasiness was gone now that the issue was joined. As always, action brought relief.

"My master, the True Man of Tulum, has ordered me to make haste. My men bear presents from him to your king.

May your city prosper; you have redoubled our friendship and earned our gratitude. But I must return at once. Take us to the prisoner."

"But a feast is planned for you who have friendship in your hands," protested the other. "The king himself will attend."

Juan allowed his haughtiness to return.

"Such condescension is too great, Captain. My heart weeps and my belly mourns to miss the feast. But alas! A king's commands are not to be slighted. The prisoner, please."

The officer shrugged and led the way across the plaza. Suspense, impatience and longing welled up in Juan. He kept his face impassive and made his steps slow with dignity. The captain stopped before one of a series of cages and a soldier opened the low door and called inside. A head appeared in the opening. Juan had to repress a shout at the sight of the wild red hair.

Valera emerged and stood up, naked, unshaven and grim. He folded his arms and looked about him. He looked over the plaza, glanced up at the bright sun and around at the world, then he turned and looked straight at Juan, who stood ten feet from him. As Juan met Valera's eyes, emotion swept through him with violence, but he returned Valera's look haughtily. For a moment they stared at each other. Valera neither moved nor changed his expression, but the sun sparkled on a tear just below one eye.

"Tie his hands," Juan ordered harshly. "I'll not have him escape me."

As the man obeyed, a woman emerged from the cage. She, too, was naked, and her slender, cream-colored body was beautiful. She was taller than most Mayan women and carried herself with pride as she stepped to Valera's side and touched his bound arms lightly.

Juan's men laid the presents on the stones. Juan ignored the prisoners, thanked the captain with many flourishes, climbed into his litter and gave the word to start. The captain of Lacanha walked beside the litter across the town, his men behind him. Impatience ate at Juan. Each step seemed slower than the last, and the town miles across. At the town's edge the officer halted. Juan saluted him from the litter.

"Straight roads, man of Lacanha. May Itzamna bring you fortune. When next you come to Tulum, inquire for Ah Jaleb. My house will be yours. Farewell."

He snapped his fingers and the bearers started forward again.

"Farewell, Ah Jaleb," called the man of Lacanha after him. "Good fortune to you."

Juan forebore to look at Valera, forcing himself to sit quietly in the litter. Trees closed in on one side, but on the other was a village. Juan remained silent until at last they should be alone, with perhaps a cornfield on one side and jungle on the other.

"Stop," he called, when they reached this privacy, and his voice shook.

"About time!" grumbled the well-known, well-loved voice of El Chato. "I grow weary walking while young rascals ride in splendor. Haste, Slow One!"

Juan walked to Valera's side and tears blurred his eyes as he drew his knife and cut the cords that tied the hands of his friend. He drew back a step, so that they could look at each other, and Valera's mouth twitched. Then Juan felt hard arms around him. They embraced and the world shifted and became whole again.

"Flat-nosed scoundrel," said Juan huskily. "Always in trouble. Terrible lot of bother to me, you are."

"One for you, Juan, one for you. I knew you'd come, but by God, I didn't expect such splendor. Where's the owner of this finery? I see no blood on it, but it can't be yours. But come here, Juan. Here is someone you must know and love."

They went to the woman who stood proudly naked, happiness and surprise in her eyes. Juan reached to his shoulders, unfastened the cloak and draped it on her shoulders. Her hands pulled it eagerly around her, and her lips quivered. Valera's voice was husky as he spoke.

"Juan, this is my wife and the best one any man ever had. Ix Chen Nahau, this is Juan Moncada, my friend."

Juan put his arms on her shoulders and drew her close.

"Sister, your man is my brother. You and I are one from this time. Welcome to my heart."

"I am confused, my tongue has no words," she replied in a low, musical voice. "This is from death to life. If you are my man's brother, then I am indeed your sister."

Juan took her arms and led her to the litter. She protested.

"Ix Chen Nahau!" he said. "Do you think I would ride while my sister walks? All I have is yours. Enter, I beg you."

She smiled, stepped into the litter and the group moved on once more after Valera had donned the loin cloth, cloak and sandals given him. He and Juan walked side by side and had so many things to say that time raced by.

In mid-afternoon they passed the intersection of trails and started toward Uxul. Soon afterwards they found the rest of Juan's men.

"By God!" said Valera. "Is this wild tale of yours true, then? You really are a prince?"

Juan grinned at Valera as he and his men stripped off their stolen clothing and dressed in their own. Ah Chacah was still with the men of Tulum. He was to replace their clothing and belongings, leave them sleeping and rejoin Juan as soon as possible.

Within a few minutes Juan and Valera, with Ix Chen riding in the litter, surrounded by eighty men, started off for Chetumal and home.

The next night, when they were well out of danger, they stopped to rest and eat after the hurried meals of the last few days. The Knife and Ah Chacah were much impressed by the way Valera could drain a gourd of wine without stopping for breath. After three demonstrations, the two Maya seized the next gourd, poured the wine over Valera's red head and christened him the Gourd—Ah Lec. By that name he was ever afterward known among the Maya.

On the outskirts of Chetumal they were met by Nachan Can and his court. Ix Pat was there, regal in white with gold ornaments and sandals, egret plumes nodding over her beautiful face. Juan saw no one else as he approached. The king, the ranks of soldiers and the priests attracted his notice only in time to avoid discourtesy. Nachan Can embraced Juan.

"Welcome to your home, my son. I rejoice to see that you have succeeded."

"Here, my father," said Juan. "Here is my brother, Ah Lec. He will be a shield to your people. And here is Ix Chen Nahau, his woman."

Nachan Can welcomed them to Chetumal and made Valera a noble immediately. Ix Chen was delighted. She had given up noble rank to marry Valera. Now her position was restored to her.

Ix Pat kept her eyes modestly on the ground and her shoulder toward Juan as enjoined by custom. But when she raised her eyes to welcome him home, they had neither shyness nor diffidence in them.

They went to the House of the Pigeons by the sea. Juan showed Valera and Ix Chen their apartments. Valera protested.

"What? Live here in your house? That's not right, Juan. Surely there is room elsewhere for us."

"There is room only here," replied Juan. "That is your house too. My God, El Chato, there's space here for a dozen! I have no wife. Come, Ix Chen, beat some sense into your husband's thick head."

"He only wishes to be coaxed, Ah Muan," said Ix Chen. "We will live in your house gladly. You say you have no woman. I say to you that I saw the way the princess Ix Pat looked at you, and I saw your face as you spoke to her. You will have a woman soon, I think."

Juan was embarrassed and startled. He knew he liked and admired Ix Pat, but to marry her! She was a great princess. Would it be possible? Ix Chen smiled at the faraway look on his face. Valera looked surprised.

"What? A beautiful girl like the princess marry an ugly, broken-down soldier like Ah Muan? Nonsense."

Before Juan could answer Ix Chen stole his words.

"I married you, my husband."

Valera grinned and said no more.

They went to work at once. Valera began training and drilling the soldiers while Juan searched for metals and built a forge. The town's artisans were set to building slightly smaller replicas of Juan's heavy bows and arrows, and the strongest, most experienced soldiers were picked to make the first companies. The first hundred selected would later be made officers, each in command of the ten men he would help train. This part of the work went well from the first. The men were intelligent, cheerful and quick to learn.

Juan had a harder problem. There were few metals in Yucatan—a little gold, silver and copper. They were all soft metals. Obsidian was better than any of them alone, even if any one of them had existed in quantities sufficient to use for weapons. Juan tried various combinations of these metals, but after two months he was no nearer a solution than before. But Valera was very pleased with his troops.

"As good soldiers as I've seen, Juan. The king is curious about them. Shall we have a review?"

"That's a good idea, El Chato. I'm getting nowhere, and I haven't told Nachan Can. We'll have the review tomorrow. Just before it I'll tell him that I've accomplished nothing. The review can then lighten his disappointment."

The next day Juan went to Nachan Can and confessed his

failure to find a metal suitable for weapons. The king's face showed his disappointment.

"My heart is heavy, my son, that you have failed in this. But Ah Huitz tells me that you haven't failed with the warriors you have trained."

"Where the Mayas have raised corn, temples and families, True Man, my former people have raised the banners of war. It is their chief occupation. Today your soldiers will show you the knowledge we have passed on to them."

"I await that showing with eagerness, Ah Muan. Now, in this matter of metals, I have a thought. In Tenochtitlan, the city of the great Montezuma, Emperor of Mexico, they have other metals. I number kinsmen of Montezuma's line among my ancestors and my people would be welcome. Perhaps some metal that would help might be found there. There is one I remember, much like moon metal, though duller and somewhat lighter in weight. It is harder too. The people of Montezuma use pieces of it as money."

"Man of God! That sounds like tin. Have these people much cópper?"

"Yes, it's plentiful there."

"Good!" said Juan. "Bronze. A good, hard metal. Thin arrow heads of bronze on long arrows will cause trouble even to men in full armor. We must send men for this metal at once."

That afternoon Juan's troops gave a demonstration of their new training to the king and his court. They were divided into companies of a hundred and squads of ten. Each man carried a spear and throwing stick, a longbow and arrows, and a round, leather-covered shield. They wore short jackets of thickly quilted cotton armor, and each carried a club or an obsidian sword at his belt.

After the first review of five hundred men, one company under Valera returned alone. Slaves set up a line of fifty straw dummies on a field. The company advanced in one line of fifty men abreast, two deep. Valera blew one long whistle blast and the men fell quickly into the harrow formation of the English longbowmen. There were four ranks of twenty-five men each, standing four paces apart. The second line took one step to the right of the first, and the third one step to the right of the second, and fourth one pace to the right of the third. Thus every man in the company had a clear field before him for arrow fire, yet at a command they could close ranks in a formation compact enough to withstand a charge.

Valera sounded two blasts. From the harrow formation a cloud of arrows skimmed close to the ground. Dust flew from the dummies, and in two minutes they bristled with arrows. At three blasts the fire stopped. At four blasts the company re-formed smoothly into the original double rank. It went through other maneuvers—advancing and retreating in line, simulating scattering before a charge of heavily armed men or cavalry, and re-forming. At one loud, sharp signal, every man fell to the ground, rising again after a moment without further orders. This action mystified the king and his court, but filled Juan with pleasure. Well executed, it would save many lives against the clumsy but deadly fire of arquebus and cannon. He had taught his soldiers to recognize the Spanish order: "Fire!" There was always a tiny interval between the order and the actual firing. Those who fell to the ground in that instant would be saved.

Nachan Can was pleased. Ah Huitz beamed. His fierce, eager face wrinkled with pleasure. He had had the intelligence to understand Juan's previous explanations. His skeptical neutrality toward the white men had by now changed to admiration and respect.

CHAPTER 18

Soon after the review Nachan Can was host at a state banquet in celebration of the new year and the good harvest. All the nobles of the city were invited and the special preparations caused comment throughout Chetumal.

The guests arrived at the palace to find even the outer courts strewn with flowers and the columns wound with flowering branches. In the banquet hall each guest was given a wreath of frangipani or honeysuckle. Nachan Can arrived at the appointed time and the guests stood still until he was seated. Juan, with the royal party, turned longing eyes to the table where the female guests sat with Ix Pat at the head and Ix Chen at her right. Ix Pat felt Juan's eyes on her. She looked at him and smiled before turning her glance modestly downward.

Slaves brought basins of warm water and cotten towels for each diner to wash his hands. The gourmets among the

guests sighed in anticipation, for the feasts of the king were famous.

More attendants came, laden with dishes, flasks and platters. First came fruits, then venison, turkey, peccary, fresh fish, partridge, beans, squash, tomatoes and other vegetables. There was corn roasted on the cob and spread with honey. There were roast quail stuffed with bananas. The dishes were prepared with flavorful sauces by cooks who had studied their art, with spices as yet unknown to Europe. Cooked foods were kept warm in chafing dishes, and with the meal were served wine and foaming cups of chocolate beaten with honey, vanilla and spices.

Dessert consisted of cakes of corn and honey in various shapes, covered with candied fruits. There were large bowls of oranges, bananas and mango cut into small pieces and garnished with palm hearts and mint.

Slaves cleared the tables and again brought bowls of scented water. As the guests washed their hands fresh garlands of flowers and many jars of cool wine were served. Young girls passed among the guests with trays of cigars and pipes already filled. Others carried flaming braziers to light them. Blue smoke rose to the ceiling and a busy hum of conversation mingled with soft music. Juan saw Ix Pat rise from her place and leave the room. He turned to Nachan Can.

"I regret to see the princess Ix Pat leave so noble a feast at this hour. I had hoped she might join us here."

"Fret not, Golden Hawk," said Nachan Can, smiling. "You will see more of Ix Pat; she has a surprise for you. But, Ah Lec, I fear that Ah Muan doesn't like the food my cooks prepare. He has eaten hardly enough for a half-grown child. Do you think I should feel insulted?"

Valera smiled from behind a long cigar.

"Aye, my lord. I think the royal displeasure should require him to sit with his hands tied behind him at a similar feast tomorrow night, with me to sit beside him and eat to add to his torment." He sighed in satisfaction.

"I don't know how the Gourd stays so slender. From the amount of food he has eaten tonight, he should rather be called Ah Pach Huitz—The Man Who Lives Behind a Hill—Fatty," said Nachan Can.

Their conversation was broken by the drawing of a large black curtain that stood at one end of the hall. Beyond it the hall was open, and the full moon shone directly on the thin sheet of white cotton stretched across the opening. The cloth

glowed as with a light of its own. The orchestra played a solemn air.

A figure enfolded in a dark cloak moved before the white screen. Slowly, like the moon coming from behind a cloud, the figure slipped sideways from behind the dark cloak. It was Ix Pat.

The soft silver light outlined her figure clearly, and the red glow of torches fell upon her from the front. She was dressed as Ixchel, the Moón Goddess. She wore a crown like the new moon and carried a round mirror of polished silver. Her dress was a white cobweb of cotton weave spangled with bits of silver. Her slim body showed through the thin weave and the polished silver reflected the torches in darting spears of light.

As she danced, it was clear to Juan that he was watching an act of genuine art. She went through intricate and formal dance steps with infinite grace. Her audience was absolutely quiet, nothing was heard but the music and the soft swish of gliding sandaled feet. Juan forgot to drink and the cigar in his hand went out as he watched.

After the dance, while applause still echoed through the hall, Ix Pat came to the king's table with a white cloak draped over her moon costume. She took a seat away from Juan, and he was unable to speak an intimate word to her. After the banquet Juan took Ix Pat for a walk by the sea in the moonlight.

"There were two moons tonight, Ix Pat. This time the moon in the sky must own herself beaten: the moon that descended to earth for the delight of mortals was the more beautiful!"

She smiled at him.

"I'm glad you liked my dance, Ah Muan. I did it for you."

Juan felt a warm tide rising in him. A great tenderness toward the small woman at his side was part of his rising passion. He turned toward the princess. They stood by a sea shimmering in black and silver. Behind them was the wall of the jungle. As he turned, a poor-me-one cried sadly from the forest. Juan didn't speak for a moment. He stood looking out to sea.

He felt surprised that no remorse accompanied his growing love for Ix Pat until the second memory-filled cry of the bird brought him understanding. The memory of Ix Koben was still warm, but she would not have a man spend his life alone for a memory. She would understand how time gnawed away too quickly at a man's youth and strength.

No longer shy and downcast, Ix Pat reached out and touched his arm. He looked at her, and everything else left his mind. The moon was bright on her oval face, the small concave curves of her cheeks were shadowed in the moonlight, and her eyes were large and clear. Her eyes blotted out the world as he took her in his arms; they widened and then closed as he kissed her. He felt the soft warmth of her body and the tenderness of her arms.

"My darling!" said Juan.

When they stepped apart a long minute later there was only one question.

"When shall we be married, my Moon Goddess?"

"As soon as my father will allow it, my lord Sun."

Happiness came over Juan, happiness such as he had not known since a day, long ago, on the banks of the Guadalquiver. He felt at last a full return to life, a life of hope, boundless love and a great opportunity. He had a place in the world and the condemnation of the church meant nothing. He felt neither like a heretic nor a renegade. He had been cast out by his own people, but he had found a new people. He had been rejected by the church but not by God. Here he found Hunab Ku, the One Only God, so like the God of the Christian Church that Juan was sure they were the same. Only blind men confused the ways of worshiping God with their own weaknesses.

Juan kissed Ix Pat again, and in his kiss was passion, respect and tenderness. He had found his haven, he had found peace, he had found his woman.

Juan had asked the war captain to act for him in the matter of his marriage, and he went to the house of the Fat Serpent, the best known of the professional matchmakers. All upperclass Mayan marriages were arranged by matchmakers, and this one received the war captain with ceremony. He eagerly undertook the commission, asking only a twentieth part of the dowry.

That afternoon Ah Cuat, the matchmaker, sought an audience with the king, who, already advised by Ix Pat, received him well. They went through the ornate forms custom required, the king gave his permission, and the matchmaker returned to Juan to tell him of his great good fortune.

"The True Man makes one condition, Lord Muan."

"What is that?"

"The marriage must take place in the house of his brother, Canek, True Man of Tayasal."

"Hah! That's easy enough. Where is Tayasal?"

"Deep in the jungle," said Ah Cuat. "Many suns from here, and by a hard road. It will take thirty suns, since the king will attend you and you must therefore travel in state. Besides the jungle there are great swamps and high mountains."

"Thirty suns!" said Juan. "A long way indeed. Before God! I hope we start soon."

All Chetumal buzzed with the announcement of the betrothal and Juan received much attention. He was invited to many villas because the marriage would make him second only to Nachan Can. He also felt the hostility of some of the young men of leading families. Ix Pat had had many suitors, and these proud men writhed at the success of a stranger and a man of another race.

At last the day of departure came. The start had been planned for early morning but, as in all journeys everywhere, much happened to delay it: a woman running to get Ix Pat's aunt's favorite scarf, a broken shaft on a litter, and all the unexpected odds and ends that had to be dealt with. The sun was high when the advance company of soldiers entered the jungle.

They followed the twisting, rapid course of the Mucul River for a hundred miles, then struck off to the southwest, through a jungle that extended over thousands of miles. Ix Pat's chair stayed sedately near that of her chaperone aunt. Juan spoke with her occasionally and her eyes glowed as they met his. Once he touched her hand and the aunt leaned from her chair to stare coldly at his arm until he moved it. Most of the time he walked at the head of the column with Valera and Ah Tok.

"It's a hell of a long walk just to get you married, Juan Moncada," grumbled Valera. "I guess it will be worth it, though. No more tomcat yowlings when I'm ready to sleep. No more chasing after any girl who shows a lifted skirt. What say you, Ah Tok?"

"Aye, you're right. He has been a problem, Ah Lec. Soon the poor princess can take over."

Such joking continued all through the trip. Nachan Can himself joined in at times and the directness and frankness of the remarks made Juan blush.

This rain forest was mystic and unknowable, yet somehow friendly behind its aloofness. The deep shade was eternal, the odors of life and death intermingled with a smell like that of a great hot house in a botanical garden. The trail led

through a never-ending vista of virgin trees, masses of liana in tangles, loops and spirals with here and there a sudden burst of pink, lavender or scarlet blossoms.

For long distances the way led through swamps, green with ooze, smelling of death. High-rooted cypress trees stood in every direction in the black water covered with lichens and hung with masses of orchids and long streamers of moss. Huge frogs croaked, birds waded and fished.

At times the wedding party was forced to wade for miles through water, feeling their way on a precarious path between beds of quicksand. Without the local guides who spent their lives exploring, and constantly memorizing the paths, passage would have been impossible. Juan had an inner vision of a column of steel-clad Spanish soldiers trying to drag armor and cannon through these swamps and over the jagged mountains ahead. Nature had erected an effective defense for Tayasal.

Finally, one day just at evening, they emerged from the jungle at the edge of a large lake. In the foreground were fires lighting up pavilions and banners, and the sound of shout and drums came across on the wind.

Juan felt Ix Pat's eyes warm upon him when Nachan Can said, "Lake Peten Itza, my children. And here is Canek to greet us. The rest of the journey we will make by water."

Canek approached, surrounded by nobles and priests. He and Nachan Can embraced. Then he took Ix Pat into his arms. Finally, Juan found himself face to face with Ah Canek Itza, king of Tayasal.

Canek was broad-shouldered and thick-waisted. His hair was iron gray, his twinkling eyes deep-set and his square chin was made grim by a long scar below the lips.

"Welcome to Tayasal, Ah Muan Kan. I am glad to find a nephew. Ix Pat has needed a man; now she has one. I am glad. But mark this, Hawk. Be a good husband to her or hawk feathers will fly!"

He took the sting from his warning by embracing Juan as he had embraced Nachan Can.

The next morning the royal party embarked in two large canoes, leaving the bearers and most of the soldiers to follow later. Each of the canoes had twenty paddlers. Cushioned seats protected by awnings were for the passengers. They made excellent time. The sun was still hours high when they rounded a steep promontory to see the City of Tayasal shining across the blue water.

The city stood upon a broad peninsula. Well back from the water were a great number of pyramids and temples. The slope of the hill toward the water was covered with villas and palaces. The blue water and the blue sky made the limestone buildings shine like snow in the sun. Flocks of water fowl whirred overhead, and fish made swirls in the clear water. The shore bordering the city was shaded by large trees from beneath which the brush had been cleared. This forest had been thinned until it looked like a great park with a few white structures here and there.

Swarms of canoes came from the city to greet them. The first were small craft paddled by girls who flung ropes of flowers into the water until the surface was a mass of color. Other canoes came in pairs tied together with long garlands of flowers. They wove their garlands round and round the canoe of the king until it looked like a floating garden. Larger canoes loaded with soldiers in holiday dress paddled close on both sides to escort the royal party ashore.

That night's feast of welcome was a great occasion. There was a great variety of food in vast quantities with wine cooled in the waters of the hills. Fountains played between the rows of guests, and flowers were everywhere. Moonlight made a black and silver net upon the waters of the lake beyond. Torchlight danced on leaves, flowers, jewels and the bare and lovely bodies of dancing girls. Music came across the water. The drifting lanterns of the fireflies shone for a moment in beauty.

On the wedding day all the men of the Itza family went to the temple of Hunab Ku. There Juan was purified; a priest heard him confess his sins, and he was dressed in a white cloak, loincloth, sandals and a flowing headdress of white feathers. Meanwhile Ix Pat was receiving the traditional exhortation given to young girls on their wedding day: Canek's wife took Ix Pat's mother's place in this ceremony.

"My beloved daughter, very little dove, you have already heard and attended the words which your father has told you. They are precious words. Take care that your garments are decent and proper, and see that you do not adorn yourself with too much finery. Let your clothes be becoming and neat. Let your words be proper, sound, and your voice gentle. Do not walk in the street with your head too high, since it is a mark of ill breeding. Do not neglect your husband. Give no favor to another, for this, my daughter, is to fall into a pit without bottom from which there is no escape.

God who is everywhere always sees you. See that you live in the world in peace; then tranquility and contentment will follow you all the days of your life."

She was bathed and dressed in a robe of scarlet with a cloak and headdress of scarlet feathers and taken to Juan in the great hall of the king, the home of the bride. Mayan marriages were prepared for in the temple and performed in the home.

The high priest of Tayasal performed the ceremony. Ix Pat and Juan stood together before him, presented by the king. The priest read the marriage agreement: Ah Muan Kan, noble, joined his house and fortune with the house of Itza by marriage with the princess Ix Pat Nachan. Then he perfumed the house with the perfume of sacred flowers and read a short and stately prayer that called upon the One Only God to bless this marriage and bring happiness to the young couple starting a new life.

It was finished. Juan and Ix Pat were married.

The couple were led down to the shore with much ceremony and gaiety. Ix Nahau and the chaperone aunt shed the usual tears all good women shed at a wedding—tears compounded of joy, regret and memories, perhaps of envy. Juan and his bride were to be alone for their Yaxkin, their time of sunshine. One of many floating islands had been towed ashore. It had been made years before on a raft of balsa logs, loaded with the rich earth of the jungle in which trees and flowers had been planted. Even a small white house had been built on a patch of soft green grass. Hibiscus, frangipani and honeysuckle showered the island with color and perfume. Trees flowered in purple and red, lavender and blue. Small trees bore ripe fruit. Food and firewood were in a storeroom. The trees were alive with birds: humming birds, mocking birds, cardinals and tanagers. Juan and Ix Pat walked onto the grassy island. As it was pushed from shore with blessings and shouts of farewell and towed out into the lake by a dozen large canoes, the sun was setting. Far from shore the canoes left them. They were alone and the breeze would take them where it would. Looking over the blue of the lake and the slowly changing colors under the deepening blue of the sky, they made a meal of fruit and wine, a small sample of the great feast now taking place in their honor in the palace of Canek.

Their bed was of fine cotton filled with flower petals. Juan brought it to the turf at the water's edge. The scarlet feathers of Ix Pat's robe blazed against the green of the grass, with

Juan's white clothing beside it. She was lovely: pale gold against the white cotton with a spray of scarlet feathers from her headdress nodding across her firm young breasts. Her body had been rubbed with the petals of frangipani and her hair was perfumed. The dying red glow of the sun shone on them both, and Juan had satiny velvet beneath his touch, velvet cool yet warm and intoxicating.

The sun of the world was gone. The sky darkened to blue-black with blazing stars, but to Ah Muan and Ix Pat the sun shone fierce and hot, the Lord Sun of their love.

And it was Yaxkin—the time of the sunshine.

CHAPTER 19

An oriole sang from a palm and a bellbird tinkled his song in the distance, joyful with morning. Juan Moncada was sharing no joy: he crouched on a bench before his villa, miserable and frightened.

Ix Pat had awakened him at midnight.

"Muan, Muan, it's coming! Get the priest, my husband. Oh! It's the time!"

Juan had scrambled out of bed with a thick lump of dread in his stomach. Soon torches had flared in the house and a sleepy servant had run for the temple while Juan hovered over his wife, feeling more futile than he'd ever felt in his life as he watched her writhe in pain. Ix Chen came at once from her room. She took him by the shoulder and told Valera to take him away.

At first, when he'd gone in to see his wife, she had welcomed him with words or a smile. Her eyes were very large in her pale face. But when he'd gone in last, an hour ago, she'd been screaming, a scream that each time ended in a whimper.

Remorse filled him as he let his mind frame the image of Ix Pat dead. He'd taken pleasure from her body; in return he'd given her agony. He forgot then that he'd given her happiness, too. Valera reappeared, ending his ghastly vision.

"How does it go now, Juan?" he asked nervously.

"I don't know, Juan Valera. I'm afraid it goes badly. It takes too long. Thank God for Ix Chen! She's with Ix Pat and will surely tell me if it's going wrong. But something

must be wrong. Holy Mary, Valera, you should have heard her scream! Why doesn't someone come out? God! El Chato, this is the only baby we'll ever have. There's too much danger for Ix Pat. No more! This is the last."

"Calm yourself, Juan. All goes well, or you would have been told. These things take time. Just be cool and don't worry."

He puffed heavily at a cigar he'd forgotten to light. Juan groaned again, got up to pace. His thoughts were confused.

The house seemed doubly silent now and Juan's fear increased. Things that had seemed important were now only trifles. Even his soldiers couldn't hold his thoughts. Two months before the trading party had returned from Tenochtitlan with two hundred men loaded with tin and copper. Juan and Valera had commenced work at once. A thousand men were equipped with long bows and a good supply of heavy arrows tipped with bronze. They had shields of alligator hide, jackets of quilted cotton, ironwood helmets and long spears with bronze heads. There hadn't been enough metal for swords, so they carried war clubs or wooden swords with obsidian edges for close work. It was a great honor in Chetumal to belong to this chosen force, and the men were the very best the nation could show. All were veterans of great strength and endurance as well as expert archers. Juan and Valera were very proud of them, and Nachan Can shared that pride.

A woman came running from the house. Men and armies left Juan's mind as his face blanched, his hair rose and his stomach curled.

"My lord Ah Muan! My lord Ah Muan! You have a daughter and the princess is asking for you!"

Juan frightened the singing birds to silence with his wild yell and ran for the house with Valera close behind. The bedroom was as familiar as the palm of his own hand, but now it was a strange place. A priest was gathering up his medicines and instruments. Ix Chen smiled at Juan. Masses of flowers were in the room and their perfume mingled with the strange smells of new life.

Ix Pat looked up at him from the bed, very small, pale and weary. She smiled, and there was a tenderness on her lips and a happiness in her gray eyes greater than he'd seen there before. He kissed her as gently as if she might break at a rough touch.

Then he became conscious of a noise, a thin and reedy wailing.

Ix Pat's lips quivered and suddenly she was sobbing while Juan made clucking noises and patted her hair. What was wrong?

"Oh, Muan. I'm so sorry! It's a girl!"

He nearly strangled trying to shout and keep his voice low at the same time.

"Sorry? I'm not sorry! I *wanted* a daughter!"

It hadn't been true before, but now it was true. Ix Pat stopped crying, and Juan approached the small bed in the corner of the room.

He managed to keep shock from his face, so Ix Pat wouldn't know. Was that red, wrinkled, misshapen mite of squirming life his daughter? Her tiny, soft, warm hand closed on his finger. A good grip, too, by Hunab Ku! Slowly a genuine smile took the place of his first glassy-eyed attempt at fatherly joy. He lifted the baby gently and carried her, squalling, to the bed.

"See, darling? See how she holds my finger? And look at her little hands. The fingernails are manicured already!"

Ix Pat smiled and reached eagerly for the baby. Juan's arms felt oddly empty when the baby was taken from them. He found himself wishing her back. Now Valera was smiling at him from the other side of the bed. He took the baby and grinned at Ix Pat over the light-fuzzed head.

"It was in good time, Princess. Another half-hour would have found us burning feathers under your husband's nose. Never have I seen a grown man so nervous!"

Ix Pat was beloved by the people of Chetumal, so there was great rejoicing in the city. Juan's soldiers swore not to go to bed sober, and many others joined them in this pledge. Juan, Valera, Ah Huitz, Ah Tok and Ah Chacah consumed a very respectable quantity of wine. In a few days the baby's round eyes of deep blue opened very wide.

"Just like a little owl," said Ah Tok.

So they named her Ix Cuy, The Owl.

The state council of Chetumal met and decided to send an embassy to the town of Champotan on the west coast. Its citizens were the best sailors among the Mayas, and Nachan Can wanted to make a trading agreement with them whereby they would bring regular supplies of copper and tin from Tenochtitlan. Under the circumstances, Juan was the obvious man for the job. He agreed to go.

His daughter was too small to travel, and Ix Pat couldn't leave her, so Juan must go without his family. It might be a

long separation. Nachan Can suggested that Juan marry a second wife to fill his bed, or at least take a couple of concubines. Mayan custom allowed Juan, as a member of the ruling class, such privileges, but Juan wouldn't agree. His love for Ix Pat made it impossible for him to entertain even the idea, let alone take another woman.

Valera was to accompany him and he, too, traveled without his wife, for Ix Chen's slender body now carried a child within it. A gentle look settled on Valera's hard face when he looked at her. She always felt his glance, and returned it with a smile.

"Juan, I've started more journeys in my life than I can remember. Now, leaving that one woman, there, who will one day have my child . . . Juan, it grips my guts. I felt the same when I journeyed from my wife so long ago in Spain. I told you of my homecoming from that journey. The memory makes me cold, Juan."

Juan put a hand on his old friend's arm.

"Stay here, El Chato. I can handle the embassy very well alone. Stay with Ix Chen. You owe it to her."

"No, Juan, I'm coming. She will be well and we'll be back before her time. We belong together, you and I, and besides, she has Ix Pat. They are closer than sisters. We're fortunate men, Juan."

"I know it well, Valera. As you will. I confess I'd like your company on the journey and we need a run together, we two, just as before."

Juan, too, felt that hard knot in his chest and throat when he said good-bye to his family.

"Good-bye for a while, Ix Pat, my darling!" he whispered to her in the dim dawn in their bed.

"Good-bye, my Hawk. May your road be straight. Return soon to your wife and daughter."

Jungle travel was an old story to them now, and fourteen days brought them to Champotan, a large city with many temples and pyramids. It was built between a wide mangrove swamp and the Champotan River. Between the city and the ocean stretched a wide, grassy plain dotted with clumps of trees. The ocean was about a mile and a half from the town.

The True Man of Champotan was a solemn man named Ah Moch Cuouh. His war captain was a strong, proud and hardheaded Maya. He was Ah Kom Tzchom, Something Red. It was a fit name. Both his temper and face were red. Juan's mission was welcome to the men of Champotan, but

custom required that such affairs go slowly and with formality.

Rain dripped and gurgled from roof eaves one morning when Juan awoke. He and his officers stretched their legs luxuriously beneath the breakfast table.

"A good day for talking treaties, Ah Muan. I love to hear the voice of the Rain God when I'm safe from his embrace. I dislike the feeling of cold water trickling down my back."

Ah Tok lit his pipe and leaned back in his carved chair. Valera picked up a gourd of wine and drank deeply.

"I agree with you, Knife," said Ah Chacah. "That is, as to the water down the back. Somehow, though, I'm not so happy today. A gloomy thought is in the back of my mind. I seem to be like a man who looks down a pleasant path he thinks stretches straight before him for a long distance—and there, close ahead, he sees a dead end."

"Too much wine last night, old friend," said Juan. "Well, I must be off to the council chamber. But first, will you come with me to the temple of Kukulkan? I want to see what the weather will do."

From the top of the pyramid, high above the ground, one had a fine view of the city, the jungle and the ocean. Today, the town was hemmed in by scudding gray clouds, the sea was leaden and rain blew before the wind. Juan looked to the east, toward Chetumal where Ix Pat was beginning the day.

"Ah Muan Kan! Look to the west! What is that?"

Two miles off the coast a watery beam of sunshine shone through a rift in the leaden sky. In full view in the center of the rift where the blue began to show were three ships heading straight for the city!

The faces of Ah Chacah and Ah Tok were living questions. This was a new sight for all of them. They looked at Juan and Valera and saw that their faces were hard. For a moment neither of them moved or spoke.

"Well, well," said Valera, softly. "Here they come. This is the day we've thought about and planned for, Juan."

"Yes. It has come."

A bleakness filled Juan. He had the feeling of the cornered prey who sees the hunter approach. Juan roused himself and suddenly smiled.

"And we stand gazing."

He remembered Ah Chacah's question and for the first time saw the astonishment on the faces of his Mayan friends.

"It is the Likinob, my friends. The Men of the East."

He saw their faces harden. Already excitement was spreading through the city below as men saw the ships. Drums beat and from one of the temples a great, silver gong sent its warning over the town.

"Come on," said Juan. "We'd better go to the palace. Ah Tok, muster our men in front of the barracks. I wish we had the full thousand instead of three hundred. Wait for us there."

"I hear and obey."

Ah Tok went away quickly, carrying in his mind's eye Ah Muan's hard, still face.

Juan arose when his advice was asked in the council chamber. His thoughts showed plainly on his face.

"I say fight them, men of Champotan! If all your soldiers were assembled and ready, I would advise meeting them on the shore to prevent the landing. As it is, I say assemble all your men and make ready for battle. Send men down to them today to find out their plans and observe their actions. But I say again, you must fight them or they will destroy you!"

"Good!" grunted Something Red. "But I am the war captain. I will be in command."

"You are the war captain," said Juan, "but not of my men. I will lead them."

"A feather! Champotan doesn't need your miserable army of three hundred men, not while Ah Kom Tzchom and the standard of this nation lead."

On this brave note the council ended, and the leaders went into the excited city. People crowded rooftops and pyramids to watch this strange sight.

The fleet consisted of two caravels and one galleon, called the Santiago. She and the expedition were commanded by Don Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba. Steadily, the fleet headed toward the bay. It had stopped raining and a steady wind from the north had replaced the fitful westerly gusts. The Spaniards were much cheered by this change, now that they were not running down a lee shore. All hands were on deck, staring at the low, green coast ahead, intrigued by the flying banners and the tall pyramids.

The ships dropped anchor in the bay. As the anchors splashed and the cables rumbled out, a cloud of water fowl whirred from the reeds of the river bank. Sea birds cried their raucous cries and wheeled in angry circles. Boats were lowered at once. The river mouth, made too shallow for

the ships by the mud bar across it, was an excellent landing place for the boats. Soon two hundred and twenty soldiers and fifty sailors were ashore and hard at work with axes, picks and shovels. Guns were ferried ashore. By midafternoon the force rested behind the walls of a small stockade, guarded by the ship's guns. Sentries walked their beats outside the gate.

In the afternoon Cordoba himself came ashore with his staff. Drums and bugles were readied, and the ordnance prepared for firing. The captain removed his helmet, drew his sword and made three cuts against the trunk of a tree left standing in the stockade's center.

"I now claim this land in the name of his gracious majesty, King Charles of Spain! I do hereby declare that I will uphold this claim, with the help of God, by force of arms upon the body of any who may venture to dispute it!"

All the guns and firelocks were fired in a volley, the drums and trumpets sounded, and the crimson and gold flag of Spain was hoisted to the top of a high flagstaff.

Many people of Champotan went down to the camp to see the strange visitors. They mingled with the soldiers on the grassy plain outside the stockade. There were some attempts at conversation, but finding them in vain, the Spaniards contented themselves were gestures and loud jokes. The Mayan women were of the lower classes, some with bare breasts, their clean bodies firm and well built. The eyes of the Spaniards lit up at the sight.

"By St. James! We've come to the right place for slaves. A shipload of these damiselas will bring a good price in Cuba!"

"That they would. But I'm afraid we'll have to carry mostly men this trip. The wenches are not so good on the plantation. Another story in bed, eh, Miguel?"

"By God, yes! But will you look, boys, at this insolent Indian dog standing behind us. He almost looks as if he understands what we're saying. Were it not for the captain's orders, I'd slit his dirty ears for him!" The Spaniard's voice was full of contempt. "On the morrow, my friend, we'll see if you look so proud when you go aboard the ship in irons. The overseer's lash will take *that* out of you, never fear!"

The listening man was Juan de Moncada, who had put on a warrior's clothing. He had covered his blond hair with a wooden helmet, his blond eyebrows with charcoal and the three hawks tattooed on his chest with a cotton jacket. His skin was burned as dark as his friends'. His eyes flashed.

So that's their design, is it? he was thinking to himself.

Slaves! I might have known it. The old philosophy—Indian dogs. All they see in this land is gain; all they can see in these good, cheerful people are new swarms of slaves to be beaten and worked to death on new plantations. Pah! By St. James . . . No! By Hunab Ku. They'll find the Maya no gentle island folk to be mistreated. Better get back to the city. There's work to be done!

The council was waiting for his report. He told them what he had overheard and murmurs of rage passed through the still-faced assembly. Without further discussion everyone voted for war.

"Good!" grunted Something Red. "I will attack tomorrow as they come toward the city. It would waste lives to do it now while they are behind walls."

"They have terrible weapons, Ah Kom," warned Juan. "Tell your warriors to expect loud noises, great sheets of flame, clouds of smoke and missiles that they can't see but that will kill them. Keep your ranks open, and have your men keep moving. Don't try to close with them! They have armor of metal so hard that no blow of a wooden sword or club will hurt them. Wear them down with spears and arrows. Ah Moch Cuouh! Send all your people into the jungle. Allow the white men to occupy the city, but keep them under constant fire. Never let them rest. We can pick them off one or two at a time. Within two days they'll be driven off and their reception won't make them eager to return!"

Ah Kom Tzchom grunted his disgust.

"The advice of a woman. Ah Muan Kan, you are afraid! I am not. I will attack these men tomorrow. I will attack as a man and a solder, face to face."

Juan cursed.

"On your head, then, will be the deaths of many of your men. My troops will fight under me in my way. But may Hunab Ku and Ek Chuah be with you. The fate of the Mayan people depends upon what we do here tomorrow!"

That night the sun set red. The fires of the Spaniards turned the leaves of the trees near the shore red. In the city the sacred fires on the pyramids sent their light dancing down the empty streets. The evening star shone in the west.

Juan missed Valera. By instinct he knew where his friend might be found, and he went at once to the pinnacle of the pyramid of Kukulkan. He found Valera alone, staring to the west, to the red glow of Spanish campfires and the twinkling lights of the ships reflected in the dark water beyond. The

altar fire showed Valera's face to be set. Yet he looked almost afraid. Juan had known his friend before many battles; danger alone could not have that effect on him. Juan walked to him and touched his shoulder lightly.

"Remembering the old days, El Chato?" Juan asked. "Are you dreading the fight against old comrades? It's hard to forget old loyalties, I know."

"Old comrades? Nay, Juan, that's not what bothers me. There may be men in that stockade whom I know. We may even have fought in the same rank before. But they're soldiers as I am a soldier. They fight whatever enemy is pointed out to them. They kill without a thought and accept their own death as part of the game. It's not that. It's . . ."

"The church," said Juan simply.

"No. Not the church, Juan. It's the cross, I think, the cross we saw over the stockade and on the ships. I am ready to fight the church and eager to fight the Inquisition. But faith dies hard, Juan. I'd not want to fight Christ or God."

"I know," said Juan. "I've lain awake many a night thinking of that. I think I've solved it for myself. Look, El Chato, over to that pyramid there. On it is a temple to Hunab Ku—the One Only God. Time was, the high priest told me, when Hunab Ku was the only god worshipped by the Mayas. They worshipped his image as a symbol and there were no sacrifices. Later other gods were introduced, and Aztec invaders brought human sacrifice and darker gods. Here we stand on the pyramid to Kukulkan. You know his story? He was a man, a human being. He had white skin and a dark beard. He came from the East. He preached love, humility and brotherhood to man. He told them of a kingdom of peace and love and gentleness. He stopped the sacrifice of men on the altars. He brought wise laws and many things to make living better and fuller. Then he was called away. He embarked in a great canoe of serpent skins, telling the mourning people that one day he would return, and he sailed back to the East.

"Men have forgotten many of his teachings since, but they worship him as a god. They sacrifice men to his honor. But in the Inquisition in Spain men have forgotten Christ's teachings. They burn men and women in His name. It seems the same to me."

"You mean that in fighting for these people, in helping them, we may be serving God still, though our enemies wear the Cross as a symbol?"

"I do. And mark you, Valera. I will not meddle now in the

religion of my adopted people, but in a more peaceful day —if one should come—I will do my damnedest to see that human sacrifice disgraces these people and their temples no more. It's a custom born of bigotry and blindness. Those are my enemies, Juan Valera, not Spaniards, not the church, certainly not God. It is bigotry we fight tomorrow, my friend."

"Aye, Juan, you're right!" Valera shook himself with great relief. "Hah! I feel myself again. I'm with you, Juan. One thing, Juan. Who was Kukulkan?"

"Who was Kukulkan? You must answer that for yourself, Juan Valera. Perhaps by tomorrow night we shall know."

CHAPTER 20

The river Champotan flowed quietly into the sea. Waterfowl fed by its edges and dragonflies zigzagged above its surface. Blackness gave way to a thin light and day began to dawn.

On the river's bank the city's landing stages were empty. Its pyramids cast brightening reflections in the water. Columns of smoke arose from cooking fires in the plaza. Here the troops were assembled, eating hot tortillas and beans, preparing for the day. The steady beat of drums came from all the pyramids. The city's priests chanted and made sacrifices at the many altars. The soldiers who lived in or near the city talked with their wives and children. The women wept, and the children gazed around them wide-eyed. Terrible stories had spread about the enemy they were to face. It was said that the men who came in the Houses That Float in the Water could call on the thunder and lightning to kill their foes! Men looked at loved faces, imagined their families as slaves in chains and felt hot courage return, despite thunder and lightning.

A young Mayan wife, whose corn planter husband now carried a spear in his hand instead of a planting stick, hugged a round-eyed, squirming bundle close to her, and stroked her husband's arm timidly. He smiled at her, then at the baby that filled both their lives, and looked awkwardly around at his comrades to see if any of them saw his weakness or the tears in his eyes.

"The war captain comes, my woman. You must leave the square. Tonight we will love again with the small warrior safe beside us. Straight be your road, beloved!"

"Straight be *thy* road, dear one."

She went away weeping, hugging the baby to her, not looking back because she didn't want to dishearten him with her tears.

In the white men's fort there was bustle and hurry. Cooking fires burned and men hurriedly ate salt meat and hard bread, washing it down with cups of fiery white wine.

"May the sun rise quickly!" said one. "I can hardly wait to fill my pouch and chest with the gold that lies in that city yonder and get my mark burned on a dozen or so stout slaves."

"Aye. And don't forget the jewels. A city like that surely has jewels set in the pavements! Too good for heathen dogs. It's time they filled the pockets of good Christians."

"And the women too!" said another, licking his lips. "By the Holy Mother! There was one yesterday who waved bare teats of such enticing proportions before me that Laranha had to hold me back from taking her then. Candles will burn if she falls to my share!"

A young, unscarred soldier spoke up. His face showed his uneasiness and wonder at his comrades' words.

"But surely, comrades, such a city will have a large army. Ought we not wait until we have more men? Can two or three hundred men capture such a place?"

"More men?" cried the first soldier in derision. "And have more hands reaching for the gold and the women? Stop worrying, Granada, there'll be no fight from those dogs. What do their numbers matter when it's the soldiers of God and Spain they face?"

"He's right," said another. "I've fought Indians in the islands in fifty battles and I've never yet had more than a scratch. Bah! What are rocks and sticks to a plate of steel?"

"Holà, boys! There's the trumpet. Here we go. Today, by St. James, the king gets a new city!"

The Spaniards fell into their disciplined ranks. In the center were four cannons mounted on wheels, pulled by sailors and manned by gunners whose matches were already smoking. Fifty arquebusiers rested their heavy weapons in the aiming forks. The sword-and-pike men made a double rank on either side of them. To the right of the guns were the banners of the expedition—the arms of Cordoba and the

scarlet and gold of Spain—and under the banners stood the officers in gleaming armor.

"Hah! They come. We shall await them here."

Cordoba spoke with satisfaction. It was far better to administer a sharp lesson close to his fort, near its guns, while his men were fresh.

Like a tide flowing between stone islands, the men of Champotan poured from their city. Beyond its limits they formed into large masses and pressed rapidly toward the enemy.

They approached the Spaniards like a thundercloud, surging from the shadow of the temple like a horde of devils climbing from a pit of blackness. As the sun rose higher, the shadow retreated, and the Mayan army moved into the sunlight like a river of color and motion. The naked bodies of the common soldiers were brightly painted in the colors of the chiefs to whom they owed allegiance. The spear points above the army flashed in the sun. The nobles and officers were magnificent in feathered headdresses and cloaks. Banners inscribed with the crests of captains, of gods and of the city floated above the massed armies, and as the Maya came, they sang their chants, shouted their war cries and clanged deer horns on turtle shells. The shrill keening of their turkey-bone whistles was like the singing in the ears that comes with the delirium of fever.

The Spaniards had one virtue: instead of mercy, generosity, pity and tolerance, they had courage. They stood without a tremor, though many a hand was slippery with sweat on pike haft or arquebus.

The Mayan wife stood on the pyramid of Kukulkan. The sun was warm on her back but fear was cold in her heart. Her man marched under the banner of the white heron. Hunab Ku be with him! The battlefield spread before her like a stage. The army of Champotan looked like a river of molten lava which could neither be dammed nor diverted. The white men in armor looked like a wall of flame.

Sailors in the maintop of the flagship looked beyond the camp with its silent guns to the line of steel that waited the wild onslaught. They had never seen the Indians approach with so much fierce eagerness to begin the fight. Involuntary prayers rose among them.

"Help them, Holy Mary! St. James be with them today!"

Ek Chuah, the Black War Captain, whipped up anger. Hunab Ku waited. Would their altars go down beneath them

or would their time be extended. Gods know all, but their blind worshippers must await the tidings of the day.

Juan led his troops behind the men of Champotan in a long line, each man's instructions drilled into him perfectly. Juan kept them out of range. Soon the guns would speak. Ah Kom Tzchom refused to lead his men except in one close-packed mass squarely into the mouths of eight cannon loaded to the muzzle with pieces of iron, fifty arquebuses and a hundred crossbows. There would soon be a slaughter.

Juan looked up and down the line of his three hundred men. From the right wing Valera looked back at him, raised his spear and shield and shouted. Juan half smiled. By God, it was good to have El Chato with him for this fight! He'd have liked to have had him at his side, but it was far better to have him encouraging and leading the right flank. Juan's smile grew broad for a moment as he remembered the startled serving girl whose rump Valera had thoroughly patted in preparation for the day. Ah Tok had the left wing of the line, and Ah Chacah was with Juan in the center.

The men stood silent and firm, like the veterans they were. Each had his light, tough shield pushed well up on his left forearm. Each longbow was strung and ready. The men had two quivers of arrows: one full of heavy shafts pointed in bronze, the other, with obsidian heads for use when they were not sure of their targets. Each men had a bronze-headed spear slung over his shoulder. Juan looked at them with pride, and swore to himself that he would not fail them.

When the Maya were fifty yards from their enemy, a sharp order cracked through the Spanish ranks. There was a moment's silence until the Spanish line exploded into smoke and flame. Eight cannon hurled bushels of iron into the close-packed army before them. Fifty arquebuses, loaded to the muzzle, poured their jagged freight into bare Mayan bodies! Great swaths were mowed through the Mayan ranks and screams of agony, shock and fear drowned the battle cries. But the Maya rallied and came on. A second volley spattered the struggling, thinning mass of men with blood. Smoke rolled over them. The heavens seemed to be falling, the sun was hidden and a third volley crashed through them. Juan cried out in agony at the massacre. The Mayan wife screamed on her pyramid, and she could hear the agonized shrieks from the men around the banner of the white heron, half obscured by smoke. With fantastic courage, the Maya pushed on. The guns crashed again. At

his order Juan's men opened fire with their long-range arrows over the heads of the shattered Maya, aiming for the guns. The men of Champotan as they struggled forward launched a sleet of light arrows and sling stones against the enemy, which glanced off mail and plate, wounding a few men but killing none. Again, by sheer courage, the Maya closed the gap, fighting across a bloody carpet of mangled bodies. And finally the two lines met.

To the Mayan wife on her pyramid and to the sailors on the mastheads nothing existed beyond this bloody battle. They watched fascinated as the bright swords played above the veil of powder smoke like heat lightning above clouds. The guns continued to roar. For several long minutes the fight went on, hand to hand. Brown bare chests stood against steel plates; wooden swords, against two-handed blades of tempered steel. The Spaniards mowed men down like wheat. When the obsidian weapons shattered, brave men beat armored heads with broken sticks! The birds had hushed and flown. This massacre left grass and flowers red with flowing blood and strewn with the entrails, hearts and brains of living men.

Flesh could not stand against steel.

The Maya reeled back as the guns tore greater gaps in their ranks, as the Spaniards cheered, as Hunab Ku tottered on his throne, as the Mayan wife moaned and hid her eyes.

Close to the Spanish line, her husband felt his life flow out of his opened chest and saw his own right arm lying three feet away on the grass. Then he felt the bodies of his comrades thick upon him. The sun faded into whirling blackness as he thought of the warmth of love in the night, of the flower touch of two tiny hands. . . .

Now Juan gave a sharp command. Ah Chacah, shaken, saw a smile appear on his leader's face, saw the mask of a smiling jaguar turned toward him.

"Now it's our turn, my friend! Now we stand fast, or, by God, we end here."

The guns fell silent and Juan's long line of men were engulfed in the crowd of fleeing men, men who sobbed as they ran, who had faced death and somehow lived to face death again. This was the danger point. The most difficult feat of all is to stand fast in the midst of fear, to see brave men in retreat, crying. But Juan's men stood fast, eyes on their captain. They faced the Spaniards, still out of range of the arquebus and too scattered for the effective use of cannon.

The Spanish bugles sounded, and the glittering line moved

slowly forward, dragging four of the guns with it. At the whistle signal, loud in the sudden quiet, Juan's men opened careful fire with the bronze-headed arrows. Seeing their firm stand, some of the retreating Maya stopped and stood to face the terrible enemy again. Juan welcomed this. It kept his men from being the single target for the enemy by the arquebuses. The air was full of the sharp twang of the bow strings, the grunts of men and the whistle of the flying arrows.

In the center of the Spanish line an armored figure paused, staggered and fell. Men stooped over the fallen officer, then one of them fell across him. They left him and hurried on. When the range closed to a hundred paces and arquebuses began coughing, Juan gave another signal. Half of his men retreated while the others fired. Those who had fired fell back twenty paces and the other half opened fire only to fall back in turn. Spaniard after Spaniard fell. At so short a range the heavy arrows could penetrate the coats of mail. Juan felt the cold lump leave his stomach.

"By God! It's working!"

The Spaniards came on more swiftly. Their lines began to break as their rage grew, and the guns fell behind. But they couldn't catch the lightly clad, swiftly moving Maya. They had been in pursuit for half a mile already. They were well away from the first battle area, carpeted with the writhing bodies of Mayan soldiers, and now the field behind them was splotched at intervals with the shining bodies of armored Spaniards. Juan shouted an order and underofficers passed it down the line. Quickly his men fell into the harrow formation, and at seventy yards poured flights of long arrows into the Spanish ranks. Arrows pinned shields to mailed arms, crashed through coats of mail, pierced visors. The Spanish line began to falter.

Cordoba saw the danger. He halted his men, then cried out in pain as he received his fourth wound. The guns came up and the line steadied.

"For the love of God, give them a volley! Together now. Ready. Fire!"

At the sharp command the men of Chetumal threw themselves flat on the ground. The guns hurled fire and death across the field. The men of Champotan fell in windrows. A thin scream arose. Most of Juan's men escaped, but this last blow was too much for their allies, who broke ranks and fled as the long arrows began again to weave a pattern of death across the bloody fields. Many of the lightly armored arquebus men fell, and the Spanish fire slackened. Eager swords-

men rushed forward, blanketing the fire of the cannon. They were met by clouds of arrows. Most of the line reeled back, the fear of defeat rising suddenly in arrogant hearts. But the gallant center, cheering beneath the banner of Spain, surged forward!

They reached the ranks of the Maya. As they had been taught, Juan's men fell into the close ranks of defense just before the moment of impact.

There was a fierce and deadly struggle. The Spaniards were weary and nearly all wounded. Juan's men were still fresh, light of foot and strong of arm. Their shields could partially deflect sword-strokes and their bronze-pointed spears pierced throats and faces. Ironwood clubs clanged against helmets. Juan found himself surrounded by flashing swords. He ducked a stroke of a two-handed sword, lunged and drove his point under the raised arm of a Spaniard, shouting as he saw him fall to the ground. Ah Chacah leaped past Juan, who heard a sickening crunch as the front of a helmet and a face were smashed by Ah Chacah's war club. Then Juan saw a blood-smeared sword appear through the back of his good friend and he could do nothing but watch Ah Chacah fall writhing to the bloody grass!

The swordsman thrust one foot beyond Ah Chacah. Juan made for him but was cut off. He dodged a stroke that slashed half the plumes from his helmet, dashed his shield against the visored face of his attacker, and finally crossed swords with the slayer of Ah Chacah. It was a close-pressed mass where the action was so fast that the eye saw it only in snatches. Juan saw the Spaniard's eyes glinting through the visor's slit, deflected a thrust with his shield, drew back his sword, and thrust quickly. The blade, turned horizontal, entered the narrow slit, and Juan shoved with all his strength. He felt the point cut bone. The man screamed and fell over Ah Chacah's body.

A sword was raised over Juan. He looked up, started to dodge and saw a long arrow cut through a mailed throat. The man fell over Juan, knocking him from his feet. Juan scrambled erect again from the welter of bodies and looked down the line.

The enemy's left had fallen back. Juan saw Valera leading a charge there. Now the Spanish center staggered back leaving a score of men dead in a horrible tangle of bodies, leaving fifty of Juan's men down and Ah Chacah dead, and Juan weeping.

The Spaniards retreated faster. Juan's men raced after them, speeding the last of their arrows into the broken group. The Maya of the city, cheered by this sudden turn, joined the pursuit. Their spears and arrows flew in clouds and many a Spaniard received his third or fourth wound. For a moment Juan hoped for a complete victory, but the fleeing enemy, protected by a screen of brave men who refused to turn their backs, came under the guns still in the fort and those of the ships, which, seeing disaster ashore, had warped into range of the beach. The brave rear-guard, stubborn to the last, brought the weapons of fallen men with them and retrieved many of the bodies.

Juan ran down the line to Valera. His friend was bloody, sweating and staggering with fatigue, but still on his feet. His face was ghastly through its covering but he grinned at Juan and waved his heavy mace—a large knob of bronze secured to a flexible wooden handle.

"Are you all right, Valera?" shouted Juan.

"Aye, and I rejoice that you are. Let's get out of here. We can't take the fort, nor do we need to. They'll pull out tonight."

Juan drew off his men. He didn't want to lose any more of them; already half were dead or severely wounded. The men of Champotan fought on, mad for revenge. They didn't try to take the fort but poured arrows, stones and spears into it from three sides, lying on the ground to escape the fire of the cannon. The Spaniards found no rest from arrows, spears, the pain of wounds and the burning sun. Boats brought a small reinforcement of frightened sailors, but the white men remained on the defensive.

There was a bleak council of war among the pain-racked men in the Spanish camp that night. There was only one answer—retreat. More than half the shore party were dead and the rest seriously wounded. Cordoba had received twelve wounds.

They returned to their ships under cover of darkness. Men wept as they listed the dead, and as they did so, sailors tugged sullenly at the capstans, hoisting the anchors.

Ashore, under the calm, distant coolness of the stars, bodies lay in heaps and rows. The Maya passed constantly among them, and many sad little groups bore mangled men back to the city.

The cicadas took up their cry. The birds returned, found the place strange with horrible noises and sights, but sang again. The call of a poor-me-one sounded far off against the

background of groans. Mist rose from the water and the river flowed on as calmly as it had all through the day of horror. The moon came up. Dew fell. The Maya finished their task of mercy and revenge.

Quiet reigned on the battlefield. From a tangled group of corpses a single rigid arm poised a clenched, cold fist in seeming anger against the pale moon. Ek Chuah, the Black War Captain, smiled while the Mayan wife wept.

With the next day's dawn there was not even a topsail in sight. The Maya had won a victory, but so many had died that there was no rejoicing. Juan was morose and heartsick. He missed the bluff Ah Chacah. He could remember him holding little Owl in his scarred arms and smiling down into her small face. Ah Tok also grieved. His wounds were nothing compared to the scar he would bear on his heart.

When Juan approached the king of Champotan to take his leave, the king was dismayed.

"You can't leave us now, Ah Muan Kan. My people are desolate; many houses are empty; many women mourn. That is the price of victory, but there is more. These terrible Men of the East will not be happy with defeat. They will return. You counseled me to fight them. You were right. We did so. Now you must stay here and teach my soldiers, so that they may win victory for us again when the Likinob return. Only you can do so. You must help us!"

There was no alternative for Juan. He must stay. Though he longed for Ix Pat and the sight of his small daughter, he knew his place was here.

"The man's right, Juan," agreed Valera. "Before God, how I'd like to be in Chetumal. But when the Spaniards return, they'll be devils for revenge. We can't abandon these people."

"You can go back, Valera," suggested Juan, only to wither under El Chato's look of scorn. He mentioned that alternative no more.

My Lord Sun made his circuits: the months of Chen and Zac passed, then Kankin and Muan and Pax. Corn grew tall again and the X-col, the birds who make the corn dance with joy at their song, sang again in the fields. Juan's thoughts turned to Chetumal with greater longing. Soon he would go. He had exchanged many messages with Ix Pat. She wanted to join him, but he had forbidden it. The next battle might be a defeat.

Juan and Valera cursed the delay. Then sails were sighted,

from the south this time. At last the Likinob approached once more!

Champotan was ready. Juan was in command and when the ships anchored off the mouth of the river, the shore was black with the orderly formations of the determined Maya.

Juan de Grijalva, the commander of the expedition, was a brave man and eager to avenge Cordoba's defeat and eventual death from his wounds. He ordered an immediate assault. He led the rush to the boats which pulled for shore in a hail of missiles.

Twice the Spaniards tried to land, pounding the beach with all the weapons available after the first repulse. Juan had the majority of his men out of danger before the cannonade started, bringing them to the beach again when the boats blanketed the ships' fire. Again the Spaniards were beaten off. The only man to touch the shore died instantly with an arrow in his throat. The boats made for the ships with every man wounded. They had been protected from immediate death only by their armor.

That was the end. The boats were hoisted, and bleeding, sobbing men slumped to the decks. Through his smashed mouth Grijalva gave the command.

"Hoist the anchor."

Humiliation and helpless rage accompanied the order. Grijalva wept. The tears streamed down his pale face and mingled with the blood flowing from his mouth.

The Maya went almost into a frenzy of celebration as they saw the sails climb the masts and the ships draw away. Juan and his men were treated as gods after this victory which had been won by his advice and leadership at a far smaller cost than the first.

Champotan received a grudging tribute from the Spaniards: in later years it was named Puerto dela Mal Pelea—The Port of the Bad Fight.

The king of Champotan said good-bye to Juan and his men as his ancestors must have done to Kukulkan when he left Yucatan in his canoe of serpent skins to sail to the East. Juan's men were loaded down with presents; the king embraced Juan at the edge of the town. Before a last turn in the trail hid the town from view, Juan looked back. Still the people of Champotan stood massed where the road began. He remembered that their faces had looked like those of children who see their father leave, not knowing when he will return.

"St. James!" said Valera. "A sad thing sometimes to be a married man. For this last fortnight, Juan, I could have had three different girls every night. And I refused. Alas, what have I become?"

"A happy man, you old faker," grinned Juan. "Neither have I any regrests at neglected opportunities."

"Strange how one woman can make all others mere shadows of womanhood," said Valera. "Holá, Juan. Home soon."

Messengers had gone ahead of them, so when, two days' march from Chetumal, a turn in the trail revealed the color of many headdresses and litters in the distance, Juan felt no surprise. When he turned to Valera he saw the same expression of triumph on his face.

A little later Juan was clasped in two strong arms and tasted tears as he kissed his happy wife. The Owl had been a baby when he left; now she was a tiny girl with yellow hair and blue eyes who looked at him solemnly even after he had snatched her up and pressed her velvety face to his own. At last she smiled and Juan's heart lurched within him in joy. He looked up to see Valera with gentle arms about Ix Chen. She was big with child, but there was great beauty in her face and eyes.

Nachan Can received his adopted son with tremendous pride and gave him new honors. The people adored him. The news of the two victories over the white men had dispelled all distrust and envy a great many Mayan men had felt at his white blood and rapid rise to power in Chetumal.

Juan supported Valera in Ix Chen's time of travail and made the same old weary jokes that had seemed so stale and profitless when fear and worry had racked him. It was a boy. His yellow hair, like cornsilk, led them to call him Ah Bacal, The Corn Ear, an object of particular beauty and value to the Maya.

CHAPTER 21

Peace relaxed Juan's battle-tautened nerves, and time passed visibly as he watched Ix Pat grow big again with child. He and Valera knew a tranquility they had never shared before, and Valera grew mellower by the day with his

wife and son. When it was obvious that Ix Pat was carrying another child, he teased Juan.

"Hah, hah, hah, Juan Moncada! Ix Pat's pregnant, eh? It seems I remember a certain Juan Moncada Golden Hawk telling me 'Never again!' Did you change your mind?"

"Yes! And you said the same a few months ago. We shall see!"

Cortes landed in the north, found Geronimo Aguilar and took him along when he sailed again to the west. Juan departed at once with an army for Champotan, which he believed would be the goal of the Spaniards. There, he stood on a pyramid and watched the sails go by to the south. He followed, arriving at Tabasco after Cortes had taken the city in great battle. Juan sent scouts into his camp and found that Geronimo Aguilar was there, and found too, to his relief, that Cortes was bound for Mexico. A few days later he saw the ships disappear to the west.

The appearance of Cortes ended Juan's peace. He set out on a crusade. Everywhere he preached one thing: unite and fight the white men! He trained troops, improved weapons, argued, praised, commanded and begged. The victories at Champotan made men listen to him. He was a torch of hope in a darkness of fear.

But hate festered everywhere in Yucatan. The Cocom hated the Xiu and Xiu hated the Itza. Cities learned Juan's tactics and used them to attack and destroy the city of their especial enemy. Instead of the union and strength he desired, Juan saw struggle and discord grow. He knew that the only hope of the Maya lay in making a unified front against the white men. Now he feared that the Spaniards would return and defeat the Maya city by city. Sad and discouraged, he returned to Chetumal.

Soon after his return, a son was born to Ix Pat. Juan's gloom lifted in his joy. They named the boy Miguel.

"Ah Mic Wel," said the Maya. "A rare name!"

There was great feasting in Chetumal at his birth.

Then came a terrible day, a day on which a large Spanish force landed without opposition on the northeast coast, not far from the town of Xelha in the province of Ekab. It was Francisco de Montejo launched at last on his project of conquest. The king of Spain had appointed him Adelantado of Yucatan and given him four hundred men, twenty guns and fifty horses. He burned his three ships, warily examined the thorny jungles of the north and prepared for battle.

But the True Man of Xelha hated the True Man of Xamanha, so instead of meeting Montejo with an army, he met him with a proposition. It was accepted. Montejo moved to Xelha and founded a city he called Salamanaca de Xelha. When he left, leaving behind a guard of forty men under d'Avila, he was accompanied by an army of a thousand Mayan soldiers.

The X-tabai were once more assisted across the threshold of Yucatan.

Xamanha fell and its king and war captain died, with their best soldiers, on the steps of Hunab Ku's pyramid. The Spaniards and the men of Xelha sacked the town, raping, murdering and burning. Next the town of Pole felt the fist of an alliance that grew stronger with each victory. Mochis and Belma surrendered. The scarlet and gold flag of Spain covered a rapidly growing portion of Yucatan.

That was the situation when Juan arrived in the northeast with a trained army of two thousand men. He arrived to hear of the terrible defeat of Chiken Chel in which that city lost twelve hundred men. Embassies were being sent to Montejo by other Mayan cities.

Juan and his army passed through land that had known the hard hand of Spanish raiding parties. Men looked at Juan and Valera with dark looks. Were they not white men? Were they not members of the nation that had plundered and slaughtered so ruthlessly?

In one village they found sixteen charred bodies lashed to the trunk of a mora tree. Vultures flapped languidly away. Flies buzzed. The wind in the leaves of the tree sounded like faint screams as if the cries of martyred men and women had been picked up by the brown foliage.

On the outskirst of a town they saw an unforgettable tree, a monument to the inhumanity of the Spaniards: from its limbs hung a score of young Mayan mothers. Enraged men knew they were mothers because small children hung by their necks from the feet of each woman. Some children were babies a few months old; some women had a tiny, tragic body dangling from each foot.

"They've gone mad!" said Valera in a strangled voice. "Mad! Juan, how can men do such things?"

"They're not men, they're devils. Juan Valera, every time I kill a Spaniard, I'm going to remember this sight! God allow it to be often!"

A few men, trembling from horrors they had seen or heard about, joined Juan's forces. Madness was in their eyes

as they took the weapons offered them. One told Juan about two Spaniards who quarreled over his young wife. Their officer, to stop the quarrel, hanged the girl before their eyes and his. He had been bound to a tree. When she died the two Spaniards laughed and shook hands. Juan could imagine their reaction. After all what was one woman? There were plenty more. And wasn't the captain a sly dog? By God, such a sense of humor! The husband had escaped into the jungle with his hands still bound. Even a jaguar was better than the white men.

Montejo was moving for Tizmin, and Juan went to help that city. It was one of the last large unconquered towns in the north. Twenty miles to the southwest Juan established a base at the village of Chama, where there were large quantities of corn and a good well. He left his bearers there with supplies of weapons and equipment. Two hundred soldiers were left to guard the baggage and Juan went on to Tizmin with eighteen hundred men.

The king greeted Juan with great joy. The Men of the East were only a day away. Stories of their cruelty had preceded them. The soldiers of Tizmin, strengthened by the knowledge that men killed in battle went straight to paradise, preferred death to submission.

"We've got to hold this town, El Chato," said Juan. "Just the fact that we've come here has raised hopes all over Yucatan. It will show the Maya the way. If we can make this a victory, all the nations will join us! But if we get beaten, if those bastards take Tizmin . . ." He shook his head.

"Many Maya will join them," finished Valera. "We can only do our best, Juan. Good fortune for the morrow, comrade."

The True Man put his army of three thousand men under Juan's command, so great was Juan's fame. The council listened for hours as Juan and the captains of Tizmin planned the next day's fight.

To the east of Tizmin the land had been cultivated until it was long grass with only an occasional patch of jungle. This was the way the Spaniards would march, across the wide, bare, level plain.

Juan felt a dread as he looked across its surface at the high grass waving and wind-shadowed in the sun. This field would soon tell the story of bare flesh against armor.

"Keep your men separated enough, so they're mobile," Juan told them. "Use your spears and arrows at close range and try not to close with them. If you must, strike for the

eye holes of the helmets. When an armored man raises his arm, strike for the open place at his armpit. Don't let the enemy through. Fall back into the city if things go badly. We must not be cut off. Fight from cover in the town—from houses, barracks, pyramid steps. Perhaps we can kill so many that, even if they take the town, they won't be able to hold it. Go to the jungle as a last resort if we lose; perhaps our day will come again."

"Good words, Juan," said Valera afterward. "If they remember them, we have a chance. But I fear the effect of gunfire. We've warned them, but words aren't cannon balls or the racket of gunfire. Tomorrow . . . I've waited before a lot of battles, Juan. I wonder if this is the last."

Night fell with cool winds. In the east, not far away, the early night sky grew red with campfires, and once, a far-off trumpet-call reached the ears of the Maya on the east wind.

It was a long night. Juan turned and turned in his bed, regretting its emptiness. His hand, restless at his side, wanted to feel Ix Pat's softness, wanted the feel of love. In the loneliness of his bed he thought of its infinite solace when it held love. Juan thought the thoughts all men have before battles. Would he die the next day? Would he ever know love again? Was his body, smooth and joyful in response to his will and loved by Ix Pat, was it to be cold? Or would it be deformed and crippled, a burden for the rest of his life?

Only tomorrow could tell.

Juan fell asleep at last. The day came too quickly, and he felt old.

They ate breakfast in the dark, and they went out in the dark. Full day found their lines in order.

Juan and his men held the left flank with two bodies of six hundred men in line. A third body of equal strength stood behind them as reserves. Juan commanded the left, Valera the right, and Ah Tok the reserves. On the left of their forces were Tizmin's three thousand men. Juan cursed when he saw their formation.

They were massed in three solid blocks of men. It was their custom. It would take more than words to change it now. They touched one another, taking courage in the warm feel of men around them. They were shadowed by their banners, and their leaders were in front of them, colorful in paint, plumes and the skins of animals.

The Spaniards and their allies came. The rising sun dazzled the Maya, and the enemy looked black and deadly against its light. The Mayan allies of the Spanish came first,

advancing in long lines parallel to the waiting army, shrilling whistles, clanging turtle shells and moaning in conchs. Juan faced them with his men, wishing they were the day's only enemy.

The distance closed to a hundred yards. Beyond the advancing army Juan saw the level ranks of Spanish pike-heads and a body of cavalry.

"Christ! Can my men withstand a cavalry charge?"

He put his whistle to his lips, looked over his men in their eight-man-deep harrow formation and sounded the signal. Officers repeated it, and the long arrows sped toward the approaching enemy.

It was a picture of death. One moment Juan saw the gray masses of the enemy advancing like a tide of men. He saw chiefs and their standards, and men waving spears and clubs. Then the whole front rank paused and collapsed on itself. The leaders spun and fell, or slumped quietly to the ground. Standards went down, lines of spearmen crumbled, many men died in the sleet of deadly arrows. Screams pierced through the enemy's noise and the thick mass of men staggered back. Rear ranks kept pushing forward as front ranks crumpled. Juan heard the screams of men who saw and felt their own beloved bodies transfixed by slim death, who felt the burning pain in a way that can be felt but not described. The Mayan army fell back.

The men of Tizmin saw the enemy in front of Juan retreat, thought the battle half won, and, screaming exultation, charged in a mass. They closed with the enemy and pushed them back, strong with triumph. But they forgot caution, warnings and fear. They drove the enemy back swiftly, relentlessly.

Then, like rolling thunder, accompanied by shouts and pennons whipped in the wind, there was a roar of hoofs and the snorts of horses and the Spanish cavalry crashed into the ranks of Tizmin. It sliced through them like a knife through jelly. Screams split the air. Lances transfixed the first victims. Swords and maces rose and fell, each stroke bringing death. Horses reared and plunged, and their iron hoofs were as deadly as the swords. Men tried to run. Crowded together, they could not. The Tizmin army broke apart, and the Mayan enemy fell on them again. It was ruthless murder on Juan's left.

Juan wheeled his six hundred men to the left and charged!

The fleeing men of Tizmin broke over his ranks like a tide against a rock. Juan's men halted and opened fire on the

cavalry. Plate, shield and horse armor turned the arrow shafts, but not completely. Men cursed their wounds, and here and there one fell from his saddle. The Spanish cavalry was hampered by the masses of living and dying men around them, but they cut their way through, like men hacking through a jungle, and moved forward slowly. Brave men fought back, leaping to seize an arm or leg and drag an armored soldier down. But maces crunched bones, swords flashed, and bravery was of no avail.

Now the world fell on the men of Tizmin as six cannon, brought up by three hundred naked Mayan slaves, opened fire on them, aiming away from the cavalry, and reaped a harvest of men. The men of Tizmin suddenly were not there and Juan's forces were open to gunfire. Cannon, loaded to the muzzle with scrap, roared across the green grass, and Juan's men went down in swaths. It was hopeless, and Juan ordered a retreat. The cavalry followed up the advantage, charged and hit them. Again there was bloody confusion. A horseman roared for Juan. Juan braced his spear haft against the earth, aimed the point for the opening between two plates of the horse's cuirass, and felt the shock as the spear entered the flesh. The horse screamed and reared. The sword stroke missed Juan, the horse went down, the armored man rolled on the ground. Three Maya fell on him, and war clubs clashed against steel like hammers on an anvil. The Spaniard staggered to his knees and an arm went round his neck. He was pulled down and a spear point thrust into his visor. He screamed and charging horsemen came between Juan and the grisly sight. Juan exchanged blows with several horsemen, dodged hoofs and drew away. The arrows of Valera's men hissed above Juan's head; the cavalry drew back again, and Juan led half of his men—all that remained—back to the other two divisions.

The men of Tizmin rallied and again attacked the advancing Mayan traitors. The fight was even for a time, then the line of four hundred Spanish infantrymen with twelve cannon and many arquebuses closed with the troops of Chetumal. Juan's men poured in their arrows, held their discipline, and dropped flat at Spanish orders for volleys. The fire of cannon and arquebus became constant and scorching. The Maya couldn't remain prone; they stood and fought, facing the fire, and they died in scores.

"Fall back!" shouted Juan. "Back to the town!"

Whistles and voices relayed his orders, and the army moved back, followed by the Spanish line and its cannon.

terrible swords and armored men. Yard by yard roaring madness plunged into Tizmin. Wooden houses were set afire and smoke covered the town. Women ran screaming. Some of the Spaniards cut them down with shouts and laughter. Here and there they stripped them and a bestial orgy started while the battle raged. Men climbed pyramid steps, fighting their pursuers as they climbed. Spanish arquebusiers laughed and touched match to their weapons. Each discharge brought men rolling down the steep steps like hoops downhill. Even on the top of Hunab Ku's temple men fought. A constant uproar of screams, shouts, shots and groans filled the world. Juan knew now the cold feeling of defeat. His voice was a hoarse croak, his plumes had been shorn away, and his blood mingled with the enemy's on his body. Tears streamed down his face at his shattered army. Two blood-stained figures grasped his arms—Ah Tok and Valera.

"This fight is lost, Juan," cried Valera in his ear. "We must gather our men and retreat! Remember Chetumal; we may still have our day!"

There was nothing more to gain, and Juan gave the word. Valera and Ah Tok blew triple blasts on their whistles. The underofficers who heard the signal repeated it again and again. All over the city the shrill whistle repeated the call of despair: "Retreat, fall back, retreat! The battle is lost."

The Spaniards and their allies were already looting, killing and drinking under cover of the black smoke of their cannon. Ruin, death and fire covered the city. But the same smoke and confusion gave the men of Chetumal a chance to fight their way to the edge of the jungle, out of the hell of flames and blood and screaming women. The green jungle closed over them. The enemy halted its advance before they reached the forest. Their losses, too, had been heavy. Tizmin was lost. Above the jungle for many miles the black column of smoke was visible—a towering signal of defeat.

Juan, Valera and Ah Tok were among the last to leave, gathering men still able to fight about them as they went. They halted just inside the edge of the jungle with two hundred men, the last of whose arrows had stopped the pursuing enemy. Juan rested his men there for two hours to give the wounded time to get clear. Then he, too, retreated toward Chama.

The once quiet village was in turmoil. He had left a hundred men along the trails as a safeguard against surprise. Cooking-fires blazed and torches were everywhere. Long rows of wounded sat or lay in the center of the village while

priests and women bandaged their wounds. Grief and despair hovered over the defeated army, but there was no panic. Juan sent the two hundred men of the base force back to watch the movements of the enemy, thus raising a shield behind which the wounded and exhausted army could rest at least for the night. Juan dreaded morning. It was only at Valera's insistence that he lay down at all. He couldn't sleep.

In the morning Juan was shocked at the decimation of his army. Twelve hundred men had been killed, badly wounded, or were missing. He thought bitter thoughts and made his calculations as he watched the remnants of his army. This was the shield he had held before the people he loved. It was inadequate. The Spaniards would have three times as many men among their Mayan allies alone.

That afternoon he sent two more companies to watch the enemy. Half a thousand men now protected his base. He and Valera settled down to devise ways of rebuilding an army.

"It's black, Juan," said Valera. "I'm afraid the Mayan people have lost heart. We haven't gained fifty men from the refugees of Tizmin."

"I know. They think the Spaniards are invincible, a visitation of the gods, a punishment for sins." Juan sighed. "One good victory would change that, but we're too weak. Our own men stand firm, but I don't know. If we're beaten again . . . We must use our heads, El Chato. Think, man, for the love of heaven!"

Juan kept the Spaniards in Tizmin surrounded by scouts. He had withdrawn his pavilion to a well a mile from Chama, but he spent most of his time with Valera in sight of the pyramids of Tizmin. Some of the Mayan renegades were captured. When they were questioned, they told an alarming story. Montejo had learned that a white man led the army of Chetumal. A great reward was offered for his head, the head of Gonzales Guerrero. The north was now conquered, and Montejo planned to advance on Chetumal, destroy the city and punish Guerrero for his stand against his own country.

When he first heard this news, Juan stood silent in the hut. He looked carefully at the harassed face of the prisoner, the blood on it, and at his own impassive guards. On the dirt floor a column of ants moved. One carried a crumb of bread. Its struggles with its burden held Juan's attention even as he thought. There it was! He was attracting destruction to the very city he had hoped to save.

Montejo made his preparations slowly and thoroughly. Tiz-

min was organized and garrisoned. Reenforcements from Honduras turned the city into a great military camp. The Spaniards even had white women with them. Juan himself, watching their preparations from the branches of a ceiba tree, saw the bright color of women's garments as they strolled in the morning coolness with a guard of armed men. He shook his head. This was no mere raid for slaves. This was a war for colonies, for towns and plantations worked by Mayan slaves for Spanish masters.

Juan had men dressed in the fashion of the Mayan allies and sent them into the city. He wanted to go himself, but reason and Valera's angry protests stopped him. One fact his spies picked up caught Juan like an angry hand: one of the women was the daughter of the Spanish general! She lived with her husband—a pale, black-bearded man—in the house of the war captain close by the palace where Montejo lived with his staff.

"Alisa!" said Juan.

He remembered her beauty and his old love for her. He remembered, too, her quick marriage to Urbino and her betrayal of him. Bitter anger rose in him. She was there in that town with Urbino, the man whom Juan hated most in the world! Out of Juan's hatred and rage a plan was born, a mad plan but one that offered a slight chance of success. He explained to Valera.

"If we could capture Urbino and Alisa!" he said. "If we could get our hands on them!"

"What then? You could kill Urbino but we'd be no better off. Less so. Montejo would take revenge on the Maya."

"I wouldn't kill him," answered Juan. "It would gripe my guts not to, but I won't use my men for personal revenge. No. If I could capture them, I'd hold them hostage for Chetumal."

Valera's face lightened.

"Juan! That might work, that might save Chetumal!" His face clouded again and he shook his head. "But only for a time. Montejo might make a treaty, might spare our city, but as soon as he had Alisa and Urbino in his hands again he would destroy us."

"But we would buy time!" said Juan. "Time, Valera. Time to prepare our people. And more!" He paced restlessly back and forth. "Don't you see, El Chato? Spies and deserters tell us that the Spaniards are torturing and enslaving even their allies, believing the war is won. They act as they did in the islands. Remember the story of the three nobles burned alive

for refusing to become Christians? We'll wait until Montejo is close to Chetumal before we try our game. Then we'll deliver Urbino in return for a treaty and demand that he bring his army north again before we give up Alisa. By then, months will have passed and the people of the north will be sick indeed of their new masters, ready to unite and revolt While the revolt keeps Montejo busy, we can build new defenses and train new armies. By God, Valera, I think I'm right!"

Valera strode to Juan and embraced him.

"By all the saints. I think so, too!" Then he laughed. "We lack one thing."

"What's that?"

"Urbino and Doña Alisa, quartered safe among thousands of Spanish and Mayan soldiers. Have you thought of that, Juan?"

"Yes. And I shall think more. I believe that I see a way, Juan Valera. I believe that I see a way!"

CHAPTER 22

Three Tizman officers who had joined Juan's forces drew a careful chart of the city and located on it the villa occupied by Urbino. One of them volunteered to guide the raiding party.

Juan's scouts marked the enemy sentry posts on the map. It had been observed that the guard was changed half an hour after the evening meal, just before dark, with no further change until midnight. Ten of his men dressed as soldiers of Xelha. From a pile of various Spanish equipment, Juan and Valera pieced out three sets of the half-armor worn by the Spaniards in camp—helmets, shields, breast and back-plates. Juan drilled one particularly courageous and faithful officer in the pronunciation of the Spanish phrase, "Sentinel alert," that was passed from sentry to sentry about the camp at night. This officer was also to be dressed in armor. A plain litter was to be taken along.

"By God!" swore Valera. "Fetch out one of the village girls, Juan. I need a rump to pat for luck. If ever we needed good luck, it's now!"

Juan grinned at his friend, but he, too, was nervous as he

gave the word to start. Juan and Valera traveled as Mayan warriors, carrying the armor and Spanish clothing in the litter. When, in the late afternoon, they arrived at a thick patch of jungle close to Tizmin, they rested and ate and fought to keep the hard fear down.

Juan knew the chance he was taking. If his party should be cut off, if he and Valera were to be captured, all hope of a successful Mayan resistance would be lost. What would happen to him and to Valera he did not think about. He had to risk it; he knew no Mayan force could stand against Montejo's army.

As the sun went down, he and Valera got into their armor. It was an indescribable sensation to feel its hard weight on the shoulders again, and the tight pressure of the helmet. The third suit of armor was worn by Ah Ceh, who muttered constantly: "Sentinel alert. Sentinel alert." It was curious to hear two words in perfect Spanish again and again during the night.

"Hunab Ku! It's heavy and awkward!" said Ah Ceh. "I do not know how the white men can move so well with this weight. I hope that running will not be required of me."

The party crept forward in the dark until fairly near a sentry post. There was plenty of noise and movement from the town. A trusted officer slid silently away with three men and Ah Ceh. Insects hummed, a bird squawked sleepily, and frogs croaked from a distant well. Someone shouted, full-voiced and merry, from across the plaza.

"Ea! Martinez, Martinez. Wait for me. I'm coming."

A drum rolled, and the sentries passed their call, "Sentinel alert," from one to another. Juan recognized Ah Ceh's voice, perfectly accented, from the sentry post ahead of them. He and the rest of his men went forward, carrying the litter. They met Ah Itzam returning with two of his men who carried the bound and unconscious body of the sentry. One man was left to guard him in a thicket while the others went on.

As they passed near the sentry post, Juan saw a mailed, erect figure properly on guard, but Ah Ceh gave no sign as they went by.

The way across the town seemed endless, particularly when they entered an area half-lit by torches at intervals and blazing campfires. Men looked up, and at the sight of two armed Spaniards walking quietly and unhurriedly ahead of a file of ten Mayan warriors and a curtained litter, waved, shouted friendly comments and returned to their game,

their wine, or other diversions. By one fire the bare limbs of women shone in the red light. Once there was a sound of sobs and an intermittent groan half-drowned by hard laughter. Another time a loud group of drunken men lurched across their path.

"Hah! Into the cursed forest, hombres? What luck? Find anyone?"

"Luck?" roared Valera in reply. "Luck, did you say? Look, lads, when a man finds an untouched village within two leagues, it's not luck. By God, it's skill!"

"A village? The devil, man! Were there virgins there? The women here are sadly used up. Where is this village?"

"No virgins *now,* lads. Find your own game. We spared one of them; she's for the officer who sent us out."

The men clamored at them. Valera cursed them back and they moved around the corner of a temple, out of sight.

"Whew!" muttered Valera. "A close thing. I was afraid they'd look in the litter to see the virgin."

"Just ahead, to the left, Ah Muan," murmured the man from Tizmin. "The house with the torch before it is the villa of the war captain."

Juan followed the direction in which the man lifted his chin. At the gateway of the villa's garden stood a guard.

"What do you want?" growled the sentry. "These are the quarters of Lord Urbino. Get along. You'll disturb him with your racket."

"This is the place we want," said Juan, harshly. "Stand aside. We have something for Don Diego."

The guard looked skeptical and reached a hand for the curtains of the litter. Juan seized his arm and peered nervously about.

"Careful! It's a woman we've brought for him. My lord doesn't want this known to his lady. Look, lad, step inside the garden with us, and we'll show you the tenderest morsel you've laid eyes on in many a day. The wench is naked."

They could see the guard lick his thick lips.

"All right, all right, in with you. Let these dogs wait out here, except for the bearers. In through the gate, quickly!"

It was dark in the garden except where the red torchlight shone through the gate.

"Here, in the light, where I can see her," muttered the guard. "The officers do well; they get the best of all. Cáspita! He with a wife as fair as heart could wish, wanting a heathen wench! It's not the first time, either."

He pulled the curtain aside and thrust his head inside the litter. As he did so, Valera twitched off his helmet and struck a heavy blow on the back of his neck with a mailed hand. The soldier sighed, his knees folded, and he slumped to the ground. Valera struck twice more to be sure of a sufficiently long period of silence, and as the blows landed, Juan beckoned the rest of their men through the gate.

The Tizmin officer led the way into the house which was familiar to him. In the dining hall they found Urbino over his wine.

"What the hell do you want here?" he yelled at Juan and Valera, seeing only the armor and clothing of common soldiers. "Why do you burst into an officer's house in this manner?"

His face changed as they rushed at him. He stepped back and was drawing his sword when they reached him. Valera caught the arm that reached for the sword and swung it back. Urbino kicked swiftly at Juan and shouted:

"Guard! Guard! to me . . ."

As Juan touched him and saw his hated face, rage laced through him. He swung his right hand in its steel glove heavily against Urbino's forehead, and Urbino went limp.

They raced the thudding footsteps to the door and won. A soldier ran into the room with his sword drawn. Valera's sword swung and flashed, and the man went down, a thrashing bundle of arms and legs. He twitched, then lay still. The Maya tied Urbino's hands and arms and put a gag in his mouth. From down the corridor a woman's voice called:

"Don Diego! Don Diego! What is it?"

It was Alisa's voice, and the sound of it hummed in Juan's belly and loins like strong drink. His hands grew cold, but a hotness surged into his chest. He and Valera went into the corridor and watched Alisa run down its candlelit length. She wore a light pink dress with a shawl over her shoulders, and as he seized her, Juan saw the pale, warm flesh above her bodice. Valera's hand muffled her scream, and Juan's arms went around her soft waist. He felt her warm body in his arms as she struggled, and a thunder roared in him. At that moment he was close to throwing her from him and running into the night. But the others were there. Juan saw her look in horror at him above Valera's hand. A gag replaced the hand, and a cloak was bundled over her head. She was tied with strips of cloth, and Juan lifted her swaddled body in his arms and carried her from the house.

Urbino was already in the litter. Juan deposited Alisa half

beside him, half on top of him and tied them down. Four men lifted the litter and followed Juan and Valera down the garden, past the silent body of the guard and out into the night. They forced themselves to walk normally. Here and there they heard voices. Laughter echoed from a house they passed, laughter and a snatch of song. A woman screamed from across the town, and dogs barked. Juan's hands were slippery with sweat. His arms still felt the soft warmth of Alisa. The sight of her had shaken him.

"By God!" said Valera. "How far is it across here? It didn't seem this far before. Ah! Here's the barracks. Good. Only a little more now."

They passed from the lighted area into sheltering darkness. Sweat trickled into Juan's eyes. They were nearly through, nearly at the post where Ah Ceh waited.

"Who goes there?" a harsh voice called across the darkness and a torch came around a house as an officer and three men walked toward them. It was a patrol.

"God curse it!" swore Valera. "Let them get close."

"Men of Urbino's troop on a mission for the captain," answered Juan carelessly.

"A mission? Now? Hold. I want to talk to you."

The officer and his men came to them. A torch was carried by a naked slave. The officer's sword was drawn and anger and suspicion showed on his face.

"Who's in the litter?" he asked in a hard voice.

Juan laughed.

"Urbino," he answered, welcoming a fight. His imagination replaced one of the unknown, hanging mothers by Ix Pat with the Owl and Miguel hanging from her feet. His hand closed on his sword hilt.

"Golfono, look in the litter," said the officer, eyeing Juan.

Juan whipped out his sword and lunged at the officer. Valera cut down Golfono, and the shout and clangor of a fight rang out. Juan's Mayan soldiers jumped into the tangle. A Spaniard killed one of them, then fell under the club of a second. Juan got his point into the officer's throat and thrust home. The last man ran. But before he left the wavering circle of light from the torch still held by the stolid slave, a spear thudded into his buttocks. He shouted as he sprawled out on the ground.

Juan's party ran for the darkness. They were joined by Ah Ceh at the town's edge. Shouts and drumbeats rolled through the city. A cannon boomed the alarm, and a trumpet pealed. Juan's men were in the jungle. They picked up

the captured sentry. They knew the jungle well and the tumult diminished as they trotted on. Soon, only the sound of insects, the calls of night birds and their own fast breathing could be heard. They met one of Juan's outposts, secured two more litters and pushed on after Juan, Valera and Ah Ceh had taken off their armor.

"Ah Puch!" gasped Ah Ceh in relief. "May the gods deliver me from wearing that again! I have passed from hatred to pity for the white men."

Juan, too, felt again with relief the light coolness of breech clout and sandals. Valera laid his armor aside with a sigh.

"I'd not go back to Spain whatever happens, Juan," he said. "I have more from life in Chetumal than I'd ever hoped, but, by God, it did bring back old times, the feeling of being one of a group of men, a comrade among comrades with no responsibilities except for the moment, no thoughts of the future, of battles or defeats. This will bring me dreams, Juan."

Urbino was alive; they heard him groan. Juan ordered a soldier to remove the cloak and gag from Alisa when he put her in the other litter. He did not trust himself near her.

The sun was up when they arrived in Chama. Juan and Valera went to the headquarters pavilion and changed into the ceremonial dress of nobles of Chetumal. Then they ordered that the prisoners be brought before them. There seemed a long delay. Juan looked at Valera's impassive face. They heard the bustle and noise of the camp through the cloth walls. Finally, the pavilion flap was pushed aside and soldiers led Urbino and Alisa into the chamber.

Urbino's hands were tied behind him. He was very pale, and his hair and beard were disarranged. Blood covered one side of his face. His eyes were on the ground, and he walked unsteadily with sagging shoulders. Juan looked at the pain and weariness on his face and he was glad. Alisa was unbound, and clung to her husband's arm. She stared straight ahead of her and looked at Juan and Valera without recognition. Juan looked back at her, studying this woman who had given him all the intoxicating pain and joy of first love.

The first quality he saw in her face was hardness. Small lines at the corners of her eyes and between nose and mouth made Juan realize how many years had passed unnoticed. The freshness of the picture he carried in his mind was gone; so were innocence and repose. This was an ambitious, selfish woman he saw before him.

But she was beautiful. She had both beauty and pride,

and pride kept her silent and reserved in this ordeal. Her hair was unloose and disheveled: there was dirt on her cheek, dark stains under her eyes and her lips were pale. Her face didn't match its remembered image, but it still had power over Juan. He shifted his gaze to Urbino to kill the first twinge of remorse. Urbino looked up, and he and Alisa stared at the two men before them.

The man on the right wore a featherwork cloak of scarlet and green. It framed his bronzed body with three yellow hawks tattooed on the chest. Royal green plumes were on his head; his loincloth glowed with color, and his sandals were covered with gold. In his right hand, he carried a short staff ornamented with feathers, carved and painted to represent a writhing serpent. The second man was less elaborately dressed, but still brilliant with featherwork of gold. Their hair and faces were partly hidden by the tall headdresses. Urbino summoned his pride and let it ring in his voice.

"So, you dogs! Little good to speak to you in a civilized tongue. A whip is what you'd understand. What do you want with us?"

They saw the first man step forward and remove his headdress as he did so. Then they saw his blond hair, his vivid blue eyes and a mouth compressed with emotion.

"Want with you?" he said. "Want with you, Don Diego? What do *you* suppose I would want with you?"

Alisa muffled a scream with her hand.

"Don Diego! It's Juan . . . Juan de Moncada!" Her voice cracked and betrayed her fear. When she realized it, her words trailed off.

Urbino closed his eyes and his mouth went slack for a moment. His was the face of a man seeing sure death, a death by the slowest torture. He spoke as if he were talking to himself, and sweat suddenly beaded his forehead.

"I thought I'd dreamed it," he said wonderingly. "I thought I'd dreamed seeing Juan de Moncada. But it's true." His head jerked erect, and he smiled stiffly. "All right, Moncada. You have us. What is your intention? Murder?"

Juan trembled and came slowly forward, staring at Urbino's face as his hands clenched and unclenched.

"Murder? Would it be murder then, Milezi Christus? You are the murderer, but not with a sword, with a lie!"

He had started softly but emotion pushed the last words out in a shout. He regained control of himself.

"Get it over with, renegade," said Urbino.

Juan laughed harshly.

"Not so quickly, Urbino. I have no rack, no boot, no thumbscrew. You see, these people are too clean for such devices. They leave them to Christians! But possibly I can devise a suitable substitute."

His control was wearing thin; another moment and he would kill the man and his plan would collapse. He spoke to the waiting guards.

"When you take this man away, strip him. Tie him to a tree. Put five men over him. They are to guard him every moment. If he escapes, they all die. No harm must come to him. Do you understand?"

"I understand and will obey," said their officer hastily, wonder showing in his face and voice. Here was a new Ah Muan Kan; a devil looked out of his eyes! Juan ran a slow glance from Alisa's feet up her slim body to her face. She drew back under his look, and pulled her shawl tightly above her breasts.

"Take the woman to my tent. Guard her well; I will go to her tonight."

He looked from Alisa to her husband, and he smiled as he spoke.

"I'll translate for you, Urbino. I told the guard to take your wife to my tent! I will go to her tonight. I shall lie with her, you liar and thief! I shall enjoy what you stole from me. Listen well. Tonight as you slump against your tree and the insects poison themselves with your blood, listen well, and perhaps you may hear her scream! Sleep well, Don Diego."

"You wouldn't dare!" raged Urbino. "You wouldn't dare! Her father will have the life of every Indian dog in Yucatan. I will kill you myself! The stake awaits you, heretic!"

"Thank you for reminding me. I'll keep it in mind when I plan your disposal, Don Diego. And now, enough, I tire of your face but not of Alisa's!"

"Take them away," he said to the guards.

When he and Valera were alone again he wheeled to face his friend.

"You see? I meant what I said. I will spare him, but I must not be close to him again. If I am, I will betray you and all my people!"

"I understand, Juan. But you will gain more this way than by killing him. No matter how slow the death, a man escapes you when he dies. You have scarred his pride with your words about Alisa. Do you mean them?"

Juan sat wearily on a stool and rested his forehead in his hands.

"I have seen my youth pass before me here, El Chato," he said bitterly. "Things turn to ashes. I keep thinking of what might have been. I think of what I have instead and I don't know whether I mourn or rejoice. I must bed her now, El Chato, I must! For both will live; both will be released. If he finds that I did not take her, he will think I was afraid of him. I shall wring some taste from the ashes, Valera, but it will be bitter."

"Bitter is a taste, too, Juan," said Valera. "A bitter taste may be as long remembered as a sweet one. I wish you joy with the night, Juan. I wish you joy."

"Joy!" said Juan, half to himself. "I wonder what it is."

He left the pavilion proudly, in his plumes. Valera stood alone. A feather had dropped from Juan's headdress. Valera picked it up and held it in his fingers, twisting and turning it. With a last gesture he ripped it apart, and the two halves fluttered to the ground.

An atmosphere of waiting hung over the camp. Juan and his men knew that the Spaniards would be moving after them. The spies were alert and waiting along the trails. The rest of the army rested nervously in camp, dreading the couriers who would bring them word that they must fight the white men again. At noon, the first messengers arrived bringing news.

After Juan's raid, an armed column had tried to move into the jungle in a long line. Arrows from the black jungle felled the naked torchbearers; men stumbled in the dark; the column halted, waited, and then returned to Tizmin. At daylight a dozen strong parties had probed the jungle, searching for the place of toughest resistance.

"As we thought, Juan," said Valera, rubbing his hands. "No need to go there. Ah Tok can handle it. He'll be with us soon enough."

"Yes," said Juan. He had counted on this pursuit. Ah Tok's orders were to fall back before it, without making a hard fight, but Juan had to repress a feeling of guilt at not being in the place of action.

He and Valera became very busy at the camp. The base was prepared for evacuation. Bearers went ahead with extra weapons and food. The wounded were sent off into the jungle on litters. The village of Chama was to be destroyed, with all supplies that could not be carried. Nothing was to be left to the enemy.

In midafternoon more messengers arrived. The main body of the Spanish army, white and Mayan, had started into the jungle along the trail to Chama. Ah Tok and his men were fighting a careful delaying action, and the army's progress was slow. By dark they would be no more than halfway to Chama.

"By God!" Valera said, his hard face happy. "With the bait we have, they'll follow us through the jungle for a long, long time. We'll make them regret it! This is our kind of a fight, Juan. Here, lad, more wine. This is our last day to sit quietly in camp and drink. Cold water and corn meal from now on —and tonight will be a busy one. For you, anyway." He leered at Juan. "Your health, sire!"

Juan drank deeply with Valera, feeling the need of wine. Not for the battles ahead—he could leave those to fate with a calm mind—but for the night! The thing he must do! As he thought of Alisa, he found expectation suddenly as strong as his resolve to go through with it.

CHAPTER 23

When Juan Moncada walked to his pavilion he was drunk. It didn't show in his walk, but his self-control had weakened. Everything seemed easy, and a hardy recklessness rose in him. He laughed as he looked across the cenote to his tent. The few huts at the pool were screened from the pool by fruit-bearing trees: tamarind, ramon and the mame, heavy with its rich, pearlike fruit. On Juan's side of the pool, the limestone walls had tumbled down making a level space by the water where his pavilion had been erected.

He walked down to the shelf of ground at the edge of the pool and looked out over the green water where dragonflies darted. He undressed and dived into the cool water, feeling it wash the weariness from his body. He came out dripping wet, wrapped his cloak around him and walked into his pavilion. It had three rooms, one for eating, one for sleeping, and one for his servant, Toxcal, who met him as he entered.

"The woman is in the sleeping room, my lord," he said as he took fresh clothing from a basket. "Is there anything you desire?"

"Yes. Wine."

Juan dressed again and drank the wine. It was cool and tasted good. He drank again. Tapers of strung candle-nuts were lighted. Juan felt fine. The swim had washed heat and dust from him, the wine was warm in his belly and when he thought of Alisa in the sleeping room a tingling current ran through him. He drank again, got up and walked into the room where she was.

Alisa rose from a stool, crossed her arms before her and stared at him. She looked wild and pale when she saw no compassion in Juan's face. She shrank back and gave him an appealing, agonized glance, watching him covertly for a change in his expression. None came. He was relentless.

"Juan! What are you going to do?"

"You heard my words to Urbino. I am no liar. I will take you!"

"No! You can't, you won't. You loved me once, Juan. Oh, Juan, you won't do this to me, you can't!"

"Can't I?"

He laughed.

"How long did you wait to marry Urbino? A month I believe it was." There was scorn in his voice. "You said you loved me, then a month after my ruin you crawled into the bed of my destroyer. Oh, yes, Alisa; I can take you, and I will. But only for one reason: to make Urbino writhe! Come. Come now!"

She fought him as he took her in his arms. She clawed at his face, but he grabbed her wrists and forced her arms behind her, holding them with one hand. Her body was hot and taut against him. He buried his right hand in her hair, pulled her face up and kissed her brutally. Her eyes were closed, and tears trickled down her cheeks. Juan was two men: one stood looking at him, looking at this Moncada who took a woman by force; the second man, the one holding Alisa, knew of the other self, repudiated it and bent again to his prey.

"Oh, Juan!" said Alisa, her voice breaking.

His right hand closed on the neck of her dress. He felt her soft flesh against his fingers. With one pull he tore her clothing to her waist, baring her round, firm breasts, pink-nippled and milk white. He pressed her against him, her nakedness against his own bare chest. She fought him, and then as suddenly relaxed and he felt her arms go around him.

"Juan," she said softly. "Juan, you leave me no pride—so it must be. Juan, you need not take me by force. I loved you once!"

He released her and stepped back, wine and passion singing in his blood. She came to him at once, her arms outstretched, and returned his kiss. The pink dress slid to her feet. Juan's fingers slipped the torn shift from her shoulders, and it slid to her hips where she caught and held it. She stood naked to the waist, in marvelous beauty, and smiled at him.

"Not in the light, Juan. Give me darkness, my beloved."

She clutched the shift. Juan pulled the curtains, and extinguished the tapers one by one. There was a velvety darkness in the tent. He opened the curtains to the cool water, and heard her move to the bed.

"I'm ready, Juan. Come to me."

He found her naked in the bed, and there was a fierce challenge in her response. She was untiring, unslakable, unfulfilled. They were together and alone in the dark surrounded by the primeval jungle in the moonless night. A smell of flowers, of jungle wildness and wood smoke came in through the open door.

Juan lay quietly, all passion drained away as sleep descended on him.

"Let us sleep, my love," said Alisa softly. "I am weary. May you sleep well, Juan."

His arm hung over the side of the low bed, and fingers touched the silkiness of her shift on the floor. His hand moved across it to the laced and ruffled ribbon still encircling the empty stocking. His wandering fingers accidentally found a narrow scabbard on the ribbon.

It was empty!

He shot up in bed, half sensing Alisa's sudden movement as he did so. Her quick blow struck his left shoulder instead of his heart. He felt a burning pain, twisted and fell across her naked body. Death lay beneath her softness. He pinned her down, found and followed her arm to the hand, felt the steel dagger, wrenched it from her and flung it across the tent. His shoulder was numb, but he could use his hand and arm. He dragged her from the bed, clutched both her hands in one of his, jerked aside the curtain to the lighted eating-room and flung her from him. The light fell upon her as she stood with hands clenched at her sides, her hair disheveled and her eyes staring fiercely. She was wild with fury and hate. Juan saw the beauty of her slim and rounded body, the swelling hips with their bronze triangle, the slim waist, the heaving breasts, but it meant only danger to him. His blood was smeared across her breasts and she was an alien creature.

Wholly sobered by the shock, Juan felt a return of respect. Disgust and contempt had almost engulfed him, but, by God, he had deserved this! Whatever her failings, she had courage! And Juan was glad.

"Better than a meaningless kiss, my lady," he said. "Thank you for a very pointed remark."

He bowed to her, his right hand on his shoulder, blood dripping between his fingers.

"I'm sorry!" she spat at him. "I'm sorry I didn't kill you. Damn you! You'll sleep some day. I'll kill you then!"

Juan smiled at her. That had been a close thing. Suppose his hand hadn't wandered to that sheath?

"I admire courage, Señora Urbino, and I'm convinced of yours. I'll give you no more opportunity to stab me. Your bed will be free of me in the future, and what's more—I don't want to torture you—you will be returned without further harm to your father, both you and your husband."

She shot him an incredulous and scornful look as he went to the curtain and drew it half closed. He turned and looked at her again, seeing her naked yet forgetful of her own nakedness, slim, gold and white, desirable and lovely. He looked at her calmly and at peace. An old canker in his memory had been lanced and eased. There had been pain, but it was gone, and he felt relieved, washed clean and free of his old love at last.

"Please excuse me, Señora. I must attend to this little souvenir of our love. Its scar on my shoulder will one day be a half-forgotten companion to the scar you left on my heart. Wounds heal, Alisa, and scars don't pain. Farewell."

He bowed again and let the curtain fall, hiding her body from his sight.

He joined Valera at the main camp at daylight. His shoulder was a little stiff and painful, but there was no other ill effect. Valera looked at the bandage pointedly.

"Ho, Juan, have I missed some battle? Or was it only a mosquito a trifle larger than one I fought off with my sword last night?"

Juan grinned at his friend.

"Education always costs something, El Chato. She had a small dagger at her stocking-top."

"And you didn't look there first? God bless me, Juan! And you a pupil of mine. Some day you'll learn. Now to business. Montejo is advancing. Shall we go meet him?"

"That we shall," said Juan. "But we must finish our job here first."

The wounded were evacuated. Then Juan sent off two hundred men loaded with corn, and set fire to the granaries and the cornfields. Ah Itzam was put in command of the base force, and ordered to the village of Acanceh, forty miles southwest. Urbino, Alisa and the sentry who had been captured with them were sent with this force, stringently guarded and kept apart. Juan and Valera took the rest of the men and departed toward Tizmin. By noon the village of Chama was a deserted place, its fields burned. It was a village of desolation.

"This is the best kind of fighting for us," said Juan as he and Valera led three hundred men through the jungle. "They won't be able to catch us, and we'll lead them a chase as long as they'll follow."

"Aye, and they'll pay men for every mile. That hare-minded plan of yours was a great stroke, Juan. Nothing less could have drawn Montejo into this jungle where we have no city to defend and where we can fight our own way. Did you ask Nachan Can for reenforcements?"

"Aye. A thousand men to be sent to Acanceh. We can use them."

They joined Ah Tok and his men ambushed the Spanish army, destroying the weak flanking parties, holding back the white men until the cavalry arrived. Then they retreated into the jungle, and prepared another ambush further along the trail. The Spanish advance was a constant guerrilla fight. Men died without a chance of coming to grips with the enemy.

When Montejo's army reached Chama, there was no end to their ordeal. The village was empty, but arrows flew day and night. There was no rest. Juan had left a broad trail into the jungle; he had also left tied to a tree in the village two of their Mayan allies who could assure Montejo that Alisa and Urbino were still alive. The Spaniards followed, and the fight through the jungle went on.

Juan's losses began to mount. Each skirmish cost him men, and he had no replacements. The Spanish cavalry caught a company in open country and killed fifty men. Soldiers grumbled around the campfires at night. Juan and Valera averted their faces, but they were aware of the growing dissatisfaction among their followers. After several days a messenger arrived from Ah Itzam at the new base. His message enraged Juan.

"Valera, look at this! Those fools at Acanceh are about to ruin our plans. Ah Itzam says they are on the point of rebellion. They demand the lives of Urbino, Alisa and that other Spaniard!"

"I was afraid of that," said Valera. "Remember those mothers they hanged, Juan? Our men remember them, too. We'd better go there."

Ah Tok was left in command of the main force while Juan and Valera with twenty men made a forced march to Acanceh through the night. Ah Itzam welcomed them with relief. No reenforcements had arrived from Chetumal.

Juan looked over the village. Men guarded his pavilion where Alisa was held. Urbino and Becquer, the sentry, were tied fast and guarded in one of the huts. In front of hut and tent, little groups of Mayan soldiers gathered and muttered angry taunts at the guards.

"Some men remain obedient in spite of Ah Cuat," said Ah Itzam. "They are the guards."

Juan's anger grew. He had been under a strain for a long time.

"This Ah Cuat," he snapped. "I think I'd best settle with him now. We shall see who leads this army! Assemble the men."

In a few minutes the two companies were drawn up in a hollow, three-sided square, facing Juan, Valera and Ah Itzam. Ah Cuat, the mutineer, was a captain of fifty. Juan found him at the head of his men.

"Men of Chetumal," began Juan. "I, your captain, have come here because I am told you murmur against my orders." He felt his legs tremble slightly with weariness. "I ordered that the two white men and the white woman be kept safe. I am told that you plan to kill them. Is it true? Speak!"

He waited through the crucial moment when one mighty roar would tell him that his men were solidly against him. It was slow to come, but murmurs gradually grew louder, and Juan shouted harshly above them.

"Ah Cuat! Come forward."

Stolidly, the officer came, saluted Juan and stood still. He was a stocky Maya, strong-bodied and thick-necked, and his face showed no emotion as he faced his captain.

"Ah Cuat, I ordered that the prisoners be kept from harm. You have told men they should be killed. Am I not your captain, am I not your leader?"

"Yes. You are captain."

"Then why do you go against my orders? Speak!"

The Maya knew he faced death, and his eyes flickered but he spoke up clearly and without a tremor.

"The white men are devils! We saw their work near Tizmin. They have killed many of us; they are evil. Why should we spare the lives of two of them and their woman? Would they spare us if we were taken? No, Ah Muan. They would not."

"Do you know why I spare them?" asked Juan.

"Yes. I know. You spare them because you, too, are a white man. You are no Maya! You will buy your own safety with their lives!"

Juan was aware of a soft murmur from the ranks though he was almost deaf with anger. Without a word he removed his cloak and helmet, kicked off his sandals and unwound his loincloth.

"Strip!" he said to Ah Cuat.

"Two knives," said Juan to Ah Itzam, feeling Valera grasp his arm.

"Rest first, Juan. For God's sake, man! You've been afoot too long. Make it tonight."

Juan shook him off, took one of the knives and handed the other to Ah Cuat. The others stepped back leaving Juan facing his opponent.

Juan noticed how Ah Cuat's eyes never left him. He had measured Juan as an opponent very carefully, and Juan's legs were tired. Weariness hampered his movements. By God, he hadn't the strength for a long fight. It would have to be quickly ended.

Juan rushed at Ah Cuat who crouched to receive the attack. He saw the Maya's knife go out and back in a feint, and he slashed at Ah Cuat's face, dodging a cut at his own belly. With a quick movement Juan got a grip on his enemy's knife wrist. Ah Cuat leaped backward and wrenched at his arm, but Juan's grip held. Juan put his knife in his teeth, grabbed the Maya's wrist with both hands and turned his back, ignoring the blows of Ah Cuat's free hand. Juan stooped, brought the Maya's arm flat over his shoulder and rolled forward, heaving on the stiffened arm as on a lever. Ah Cuat flew over his head, Juan straightened and brought the arm up high, brought all his weight on it and slammed Ah Cuat on his back to the ground! A shout broke from the watching men as the knife dropped from the dazed Maya's fingers. Juan whipped his own knife from his teeth, fell with both knees on the Maya's chest and brought the knife

high for the stroke. The sweat-stained chest, painted scarlet and green, was bared to his knife-point. It was the chest of a warrior of Chetumal—one of his men!

Juan dropped the knife and smashed Ah Cuat's chin three times with his fist. When he got up, Ah Cuat lay motionless on the ground. Juan stepped back with his chest heaving, and faced his troops.

"Has anyone else here anything to say against my orders?"

There was no answer.

"Then I will tell you my plans as a man speaking to his friends. The three white people are hostages. When we have exhausted the white army and drawn it as far as we can into the jungle, we will exchange these three hostages for the safety of Chetumal. In the meantime, you will follow my orders. You will guard the prisoners with your lives. What do you say?"

A shout was his answer, followed by: "Yes! Yes! Ah Muan Kan. Ah Muan Kan! We are your men, Ah Muan!"

He looked at them, smiled and turned away, walking toward one of the huts. Valera came after him and took his arm.

"Juan, my friend, you are a leader of men! You have bound them to you more strongly then before. They'll follow you forever. If we could only win one more victory. But by God, you scared me with that fight! Now you must rest. Montejo is twenty miles off, and Ah Tok stands beween him and us."

"Rest? Juan Valera, it seems a long time since I rested. I'll rest now and you must too. Let's sleep, and perhaps dream of a day when we can really rest. Hasten that day!"

CHAPTER 24

At noon Valera left Juan still asleep and went to find Ah Cuat, who was under guard.

"Ah Cuat," he said, "you should be dead."

The Maya nodded.

"I know it well, Ah Lec."

"Do you know why Ah Muan spared you?"

"No."

"I'll tell you why. You are one of his men. He needs them

all to fight against the Men of the East. Ah Cuat, will you fight again for Ah Muan, faithfully, as in the past?"

Ah Cuat looked straight at Valera.

"Ah Lec," he said, softly, "I swear by Hunab Ku that I will never question Ah Muan's words again. I have been told what he plans. An X-tabai must have drawn scales before my eyes. I will be faithful to Ah Muan."

Valera ordered him released and restored to his command. Ah Cuat's eyes regained life at the order. He saluted Valera and hurried off.

Juan was awakened in the soft dusk.

"Juan, wake up. Wake up, boy. Our outposts say men of Chetumal are coming. Our reenforcements have arrived, Juan! Now, perhaps we can attack instead of running."

Juan was fully conscious instantly.

"What's that you say? From Chetumal? Good! Let's go and meet them."

They left the hut to watch the torches arrive in the clearing. Juan stopped a moment in perplexity.

"Cursed short line, Valera. Do you suppose that's all?"

"Must be just the first detachment, Juan, with the others close behind, but I don't see why . . . Why! Juan! Who is that walking at the head? Look, Juan, look, near that light over there! Am I right?"

He received no answer, but Juan broke into a run.

"Ix Pat!" he cried.

At the sound of Juan's voice a slim soldier who marched in front of a litter cried out and ran to meet him. A slightly taller figure followed. It was Valera's wife, Ix Chen.

Juan and Ix Pat met in a hot embrace. He had forgotten how her small and lovely body fitted in his arms.

"My Pat," he murmured, "my darling."

"Oh, Hawk, I had to come. I had to! Are you all right? Are you well?"

Close beside them Ix Chen was in Valera's arms, and the two couples had their moment of joy.

"Where are the rest of the soldiers, Ix Pat?" Valera finally asked. "We requested a thousand men."

The joy left Ix Pat's voice and face as she answered, "We have only our guard of a hundred men."

"Only a hundred? A hundred! Has Nachan Can forsaken me, Ix Pat? Does he trust me no longer?" Juan asked.

"My father will never go against you, Ah Muan. He wanted to send the men but the state council refused. They wanted to keep the men in the city for its defense. To have

repudiated their advice might have ruined our city, and my father told me to tell you that he could not take that chance. He wishes you good fortune, and says that command of all the army awaits you on your return."

This disappointment was a blow to Juan and his plans. Ix Pat saw his discouragement. She moved into his arms, and again her love strengthened him. He pushed despair aside and led his men in a welcome to the newcomers. With Ix Pat in his arms that night, he felt that he had come home again.

When Montejo's army arrived at Acanceh, they found the city deserted. His officers were discouraged, and advised that they give up the pursuit. The army was weary, and the Mayan allies had suffered heavily. There seemed no alternative until a weary and exhausted man came into the camp from the jungle. He was one of their allies, captured in a skirmish and intentionally allowed to escape. He told of Ah Cuat's rebellion, of mutiny in the army. He reported that expected reenforcements had failed to arrive, that Urbino and his wife were alive and that the disorganized, mutinous army of Ah Muan Kan lay only a short distance ahead.

This time Montejo's men set out with a will. For several days there were no ambushes, and this increased their confidence. Then the attacks began, with arrows and spears from the shelter of the jungle. Stragglers were killed, and scouts and messengers waylaid. Montejo set his jaw and led on for weeks of heat and fighting and hatred.

When Lake Chichencaneb's blue length was visible through the jungle, Juan knew that he was near the end of his resources. His men had fought bravely, but they were discontented.

"I understand," said Juan to Valera. "They have seen the murdered and tortured women and children of some of the people conquered by the Spaniards. Most of them have families in Chetumal, and in this time of danger they want to be with them. They know my purpose, but still, in their minds, they see their people treated as others have been."

"What shall we do?"

"Rest here by the lake and call a full council. Perhaps we can persuade them to go on awhile longer. I don't know."

Juan got up and looked around him. To his right was the lake with a grassy meadow, once a cornfield, stretching down to the water in a point. Beyond this promontory, to the south, was dense jungle. His men sat around cooking fires and beyond them was his pavilion.

Ix Pat looked with loving anxiety at her husband, but she glanced now and again at the tent where Alisa was. She knew that the bronze-haired girl had once been something to her Ah Muan Kan. News of her presence had impelled Ix Pat to make this trip, not through mere jealousy, but to keep what was hers, to fight for Juan's love. She had been a little fearful when she arrived. Now she was fully reassured. Her instinct, everything she observed and felt, told her she no longer had anything to fear from the white woman.

Juan was suddenly jerked from his thoughts by the sound of a shot from the jungle not more than a mile away! Terror froze him when he looked at Ix Pat. He rushed into frenzied action, his voice roaring through the startled camp.

Juan had relaxed his caution. For the first time he had halted at a spot to which a clear and continuous trail led from the Spanish army. That morning, in a last desperate attempt before giving up, Montejo had mounted a horse and led his cavalry forward along the trail at top speed. They had burst past Juan's outer defense, traveling faster on the open trail than Juan's men could send warning. Fury rode with Montejo. This was his last gamble!

Juan's men sprang into action. Poles were thrust between the bound arms and legs of Urbino and Becquer, set across sturdy shoulders and carried rapidly across the open meadow. Alisa was almost dumped into a litter and hurried off. Ah Tok took four companies and the bearers, who seized a few loads of corn and the spare weapons and arrows, and sped across the clearing.

"Go!" shouted Juan to Ix Pat. "Run! Go, if you love me!"

She threw him an agonized glance, then hurried away with Ix Chen, surrounded by the last company of Ah Tok's men. The army made a disorganized exit across the clearing, but they were safely away. Juan kept three hundred men with him to make a rear guard stand.

Juan faced the jungle in the direction of the shot, his thoughts bitter and self-accusing. He cursed his lack of caution. All that had saved him thus far was an outpost of fifty men under Ah Ceh, standing across the trail a half-mile from the clearing. They were holding the attackers temporarily, but it would inevitably be at the cost of their lives. Men gave up their lives for Juan unseen in the jungle, and there was nothing he could do.

"We must hold them here, men of Chetumal!" shouted Juan. "Go to that point of land by the water! Quickly!"

They ran for the promontory in masses. More shots and the far, faint shouts of men sounded from the jungle.

"How long can he hold them?" Juan asked himself as he ran. "Ah Ceh! Your death will be my fault!"

The head of the column of fleeing refugees reached the jungle trail and disappeared. The long, hurrying line stretched behind them. Juan kept his eyes on the trail mouth from which the enemy must soon emerge. He prayed now.

He and his men reached the point.

"Form threes," Juan shouted. "Remember my orders. Spread out, close by the water!"

His three hundred men fell into groups of three, spread far apart, close to the lake. Their grumbles against Ah Muan were forgotten. He was a leader men could follow, and he communicated to them his own courage. They shouted for him and strung their bows for battle.

While the figures of his running army were still in sight, shining armor appeared from the other trail and the cavalry flashed into the clearing. They raised the shout for blood at the sight of the force trapped on the point with its tents and huts and cooking fires. Juan grew limp with relief—the last of his people had passed around a bend in the trail. The Spaniards could not have seen them.

The Spaniards charged, blood-mad from the fight just finished in which fifty Maya had died. Several of the horses had to carry double, which enraged the white men, since a horse was worth half a dozen soldiers. They smashed down on the promontory in a furious charge. Juan's men, grouped by threes, planted their spearhafts in the ground, points toward the enemy, and crouched behind the spears, bows ready.

"Get the horses!" Juan shouted to his men. "Get the horses. At the signal to retreat, go into the water! Hunab Ku be with you!"

The Spanish charged, spread out to hit all the enemy. Montejo cursed at the thin-spread Mayan ranks.

"Santiago and Spain!" he shouted. "No quarter, kill them all!"

Juan, Valera and Ah Itzam made a group of three. Juan looked between spear-points and saw a red-cloaked horseman, sword poised, nearly upon them. Three bows twanged: one arrow glanced from the man's helmet, another was turned by the horse's cuirass, and the third pierced the horse's leg. The horse reared and plunged. The sword flashed down. Ah Itzam dodged too slowly and his head was split.

Juan lunged to the side and parried the horseman's next stroke. Valera fell to the ground under the horse, and his sword flashed upward into its bare belly. The horse screamed, reared again and fell backward. Juan killed the fallen Spaniard as Valera got up. Together they looked over the savage scene.

Many Maya were down. The rest fought and ran and dodged. Horses and riders were tired, and their quick-footed enemy, hard to catch. Juan counted half a dozen horses down, saw a couple of empty saddles, and above all, blood streaming down scores of flanks and hamstrung legs. He put his whistle to his mouth and blew three blasts!

Other whistles blew and men ran simultaneously for the water. The Spaniards were surprised by the quick transition from hard battle to sudden flight. Men by the score splashed into the lake.

When Juan and Valera saw that most of their men were already safe, they ran for the water twenty feet away where armored men would not dare follow. Halfway across the nightmare distance, the thud of hoofs caught up to them. They turned in time for Valera, who was nearest, to parry the blow of a mace in the hand of a horseman. The Spaniard struck again at him. Clumps of turf flew as he checked his horse. Valera saw the danger and his parrying stroke met the mace. Steel rang on steel. Valera's strength and skill slowed the downward smash of the heavy weapon, but could not stop it. Juan cried out as the mace struck El Chato's helmet.

Valera crumpled to the ground like an empty sack. The horseman wheeled his horse above him, and as Juan leaped, he half-heard, half-saw the iron-shod hoofs strike down on the body of his friend. Madness put power in Juan's legs, and his leap carried him to the horseman's saddle. Juan's arm went around him. He braced his foot on the saddle skirts, plucked the Spaniard from his seat and threw him to the ground. Juan fell on top of him and killed him with his dagger. Then Juan picked up Valera. He tried to run toward the water. A shrill shout split the air behind him and a sword flashed in the sun, ready to begin its downward stroke. But a naked body came between Juan and death. It was Ah Cuat, once a mutineer, who leaped to drag the Spaniard from his saddle, but he missed and the sword swung down on him. Ah Cuat fell dead as Juan and Valera plunged together into the lake.

A man helped Juan tow Valera from the shore. Yells rang out behind them.

"Felix! Your arquebus, quick! There's the white renegade! I see his red hair!"

Juan swam desperately. Another Maya came to his rescue. Thirty feet from shore Juan looked back to see the arquebus leveled, the match approaching the lock! He grabbed Valera by the head, shouted "Dive!" and the little knot of men ducked under water just as a handful of metal fragments hit the surface.

Montejo tore off his helmet and dashed it to the ground in anger.

"They're escaping!" he bawled. "After them! Follow along the shore!"

The lake was dotted with heads as men swam swiftly toward the jungle. Juan's men swam across the bay. To reach the spot where they would go ashore the Spaniards would have to cut their way through half a mile of thick jungle forest. They straggled slowly along the shore. Montejo looked at his men and bit his lips until they bled.

Of his horses, half were wounded. Five men lay dead, or badly hurt; many others were binding wounds. The wounded counted for little compared to the disaster of losing so many horses. Even as Montejo counted, one horse groaned and collapsed beneath its rider.

"Blood of Christ!" Montejo swore. Then he shouted to recall his men. "We will wait here for the infantry, Don Christobal. Tell the men to tend the wounds of the horses before their own. These damned Indian dogs! Let them escape. I shall go to their city, and may God curse me if I leave a man, woman or child alive!"

Thankfully, Juan watched the Spaniards turn back toward his abandoned camp. His pavilion and ceremonial robes, his supplies and his spare equipment were there, but if Valera could be saved, Montejo was welcome to all he found. Valera, however, was still unconscious in his arms. Juan was terrified at his slack face and the trickle of blood from his nose and mouth.

They crawled into the jungle for shelter, and Juan sent out scouts at once. There were few seriously wounded men among them; those unable to swim had either drowned or been left to the Spaniards. Crude litters were quickly rigged of breech-clouts and bamboo to carry men unable to walk and the wet, naked and nearly unarmed mob moved off through the jungle to the trail. No Spaniards followed, and

Juan and his men trotted doggedly along its winding surface, hoping soon to see Ah Tok's rear guard before them. Juan thanked the saints that the bearers carried extra weapons.

They caught up with Ah Tok at dusk. Anxiety for Valera made him hardly aware of Ix Pat as her arms went around him. He was aware only of the pain on Ix Chen's face as she knelt at Valera's side, and of her terror.

Valera lived, and only when he began to recover did Juan feel fully alive again. The priest reported that Valera's head was whole, though battered, but that his right leg was broken. He would be out of the fight, but that didn't dampen Juan's joy. Ix Pat saw Juan's shoulders straighten, and she took his tired head in her arms. This time he was aware.

When Montejo moved again, it was directly toward Chetumal. He had determined to take his revenge on the city. To give up the pursuit of the captors of his daughter and her husband had hurt his pride, but their rescue appeared at the moment to be hopeless. Besides, his army was almost ready to mutiny. Montejo swore to reduce Chetumal to rubble and its people to corpses. He prayed that at the same time he would be able to lay hands on the Moncada whelp. The renegade! The heretic! Montejo loved his daughter, but more than love for her was involved: Urbino represented the power of the church, and Montejo needed his support. He had enemies at court in Spain as well as in Yucatan.

When Juan's men realized that Montejo marched for Chetumal, they were anxious to throw themselves before it. They forgot discouragement. They would take any risk to stop the Spanish advance. The guerrilla attacks started again. The prisoners, the women and the wounded were kept at a safe distance from danger. Village granaries fed the men as they moved ahead of the Spaniards, and Juan picked up two hundred or so sturdy reenforcements from among the corn planters. They harassed the Spanish army incessantly, but Montejo refused to be drawn aside. His inflexible will would not be deflected from its goal. His men were cheerful. They were marching from the stinking jungle to the seacoast where there would be riches to plunder, wine as well as women. Montejo told this to his army in detail to whet their appetites and to give them hope. Men licked their lips and thought of the sport ahead of them.

Days grew into weeks, and the part of the jungle they fought in seemed to have endless streams and even an occasional lake. Juan's men scouted and fought and ran,

gathered together and fought again. Juan hugged his plan to him and waited, supported by Ix Pat's love and the faith and renewed allegiance of his men. At last, they reached Lake Xaxlar. Chetumal lay only forty miles ahead.

"Well, Juan," said Valera with his twisted grin. "Is this the place?"

"Yes, El Chato. We'll try it here. Send for Señor Becquer."

"And I shall send for Ix Chen and pat her rump most thoroughly. This is the time for fortune. But remember this, Juan. Whatever happens, you have done everything a man could do. If we fail, you must not blame yourself."

Juan smiled. His cheeks were hollow from weariness. New lines and a new scar marked his face, and a dirty bandage covered the wound on his right arm. He and Valera, together, interviewed Becquer when he was brought to them, sick and thin from his long imprisonment. He was sure it was death, but he no longer cared, and awaited his fate with composure.

"You are a fortunate man, Señor," Juan told him politely. "I am sending you back to your comrades today. In two hours your captivity will be over."

Surprise and shock at hearing this in Spanish as much as the message itself made Becquer's face a blank. He stared, unbelieving, at Juan. Hope weakened him a little, and his knees shook. Juan pointed to a log for Becquer to sit on. Then Juan continued. "There is something you must do, a thing you must say to Montejo. His daughter and Urbino are alive and well as you know. Tell him if he moves one mile closer to Chetumal, they will be killed." Becquer sat up with a jerk. "There is more. Tell Montejo that if he agrees, if he will swear, and it must be in writing before a notary, that he will return to the north and never again attempt to conquer southern Yucatan and Chetumal, his daughter and her husband will be returned to him alive. He must send that written, solemn oath to me. After he has gone three days' journey north, Urbino will be returned. I will march with his daughter to Tizmin in the north. When Montejo and his army arrive within five leagues of Tizmin, then Doña Alisa will be returned to him. Do you understand the message?"

"Yes. Now I understand everything."

"Good! Will you deliver my message?"

"Yes."

He was sent to the Spanish camp with ten men who released him almost in sight of the army. Montejo sent for him at once.

After he had recovered from his surprise, Montejo paced his tent. His beard was now all gray, his face thin and his eyes very deep-set, but his lips were as firm as ever and showed his determination.

By God, I'm caught! he thought, even as he felt joy and relief at the possibility of saving his daughter and Urbino. I must give up the attack on Chetumal and move north. Should I be defeated at Chetumal, everything would be lost. Yes, I must accept the terms. But if I ever catch this Moncada, I'll have him skinned alive and then burned! Once I have Don Diego and Alisa in my hands, I'll send for reenforcements and return to Chetumal. May God help its inhabitants when I do! Oath! What's an oath? The church states that no oath made to a heathen is valid.

He spoke aloud.

"Send for my notary and my secretary, Don Martin. We must accept this offer. But our day will come."

His aide saluted, went to the door, and passed the orders on to the sentry.

Juan received the ornate parchment the next day and put it away with a sardonic smile. Valera grinned at him.

"I wonder what the value of paper, ink and seal might be," he asked. "For that's certainly the total worth of that document."

Juan smiled his agreement, but a warm glow of success swept through him.

"We've won this hand, El Chato. We have our reprieve if Montejo starts north."

"He will," said Valera confidently. "We've got him in the bight, as the bo's'n used to say."

The next day, the Spaniards broke camp and traveled north. After three days Juan delivered Urbino to Montejo. He felt a physical sickness at first when Urbino left camp with his guard. Disappointment and a sense of betrayal disturbed him. He had liberated his parents' murderer and his own greatest enemy. He would never forget Urbino's smile while the thumbscrew and boot were fastened to Juan's mother, and yet Urbino was leaving Juan's hands alive!

Juan thought of his father, expecting to feel pain. Instead he was comforted. He had spared Urbino to save people who were good to him, who trusted him and depended on him. These soldiers about him—their lives were perhaps saved by this action. Ix Pat was saved, and his children! His spirits rose again. He knew that Don Miguel would have approved. He flexed his arms and rose from his seat relaxed

and eager. He had given up revenge for the sake of others. He had won something more than time.

CHAPTER 25

For several days Juan followed the Spaniards on their journey to Tizmin. Then, convinced that they intended to carry out the first part of the agreement, he halted his army and prepared Ah Tok to continue to Tizmin with Alisa and a hundred men.

"Be cautious always, Ah Tok," urged Juan nervously. "Never trust a Spaniard. At Tizmin, have Montejo send a few men to meet you, then send the woman forward to them. Take no chances."

"Yes, Ah Muan," grinned the Knife. "I know how careful you always are, how seldom you take chances. But let not your heart carry a burden for me. I will be cautious."

Juan walked to Alisa's litter. This was the first time he had gone near her since that night in his pavilion. He drew aside the curtain and looked perhaps for the last time at this woman who had once meant so much to him but who was now only a pawn in his play for time. The earlier part of the captivity had been physically easy for her, with her own tent and litter. After the surprise attack at the lake it had been harder, for she had had to sleep in crude shelters surrounded by men who hated her. She had made countless forced marches in suffocating heat, tortured by fear. She had not been allowed to speak to Urbino. Her eyes watched Juan's with hatred.

Alisa felt a surge of anger as she looked at Juan. How could she ever have thought she loved him, even as a naïve young girl? On his bare left shoulder she saw the reddish, triangular wound made by her dagger. She hated him far worse now than she had that night! Then he had offended only her person, had endangered only her life. Now her pride was deeply hurt. He hadn't been near her since!

She looked past him and saw Ix Pat standing in the trail. The clear beauty of the younger woman, the slim and infinite grace of her body filled Alisa with a gnawing rage. The clod! To marry an Indian wench, to forget his blood, his

pride! She closed her eyes to Ix Pat's quiet, regal dignity, and her lip curled in a sneer.

"Go to your Indian slut, Juan Moncada. Go to her and breed, but cease worrying me with your presence, in God's name!"

Juan had thought himself beyond anger, but Alisa had, womanlike, found the one thing that could disturb him. He turned pale but forced his anger down.

"Yes, Alisa, I will go to my princess and to my children. I am content to go. I have had you both, you see, and I find my wife by far the better lover and by far the more beautiful. You go to Urbino. I wish you joy with him."

She hissed at him like a snake, but he closed the curtains and turned to Ah Tok.

"Get going, Knife, and may Hunab Ku be with you. Return as quickly as you can, for we have a great deal to do."

He stood by the trail and stared after them until they rounded a bend. Ix Pat stepped to his side and took his arm.

"They are gone, my man. Come, let us go home, home, Ah Muan, to the Owl and Ah Mic Wel!"

A slow smile of pleasure spread over Juan's face at the mention of the two children. Together he and Ix Pat walked back to the camp where Valera lay on a litter cursing his inactivity. The soldiers waited the order to march, joyful at the prospect of going home.

Nachan Can and the state council met them at the edge of the city. The homecoming was a mixture of joy and sorrow. The people cheered Ah Muan Kan. Juan and the True Man embraced while the people shouted their approval.

"My son," said Nachan Can. "You have grown older and sadder. Your valiant struggle has left its mark on your face. You have been a shield to my people. You have our gratitude!" He motioned a litter forward. "Here is your reward."

Juan swept the curtain aside, and his two children leapt into his arms. He felt the warmth and firmness of their chunky bodies, and looked into the small, blue-eyed faces filled with wonder and uncertainty. Then Ix Pat embraced all three, and the children laughed.

The Owl shouted. "Father! Father! Now I remember!"

Juan looked at Valera in his litter. The discontent and anger had left his face. The Corncob was squirming in his arms, and Ix Chen smiled down at him.

"What of our other son?" asked Nachan Can, stepping to Valera's side. "I mourn to see you thus, but surely the giver of life will soon make you whole again."

"Aye. Soon I will walk again. I can already take a few steps with the help of sticks." Valera flushed.

Concern had been plain in the king's voice and Valera was pleased.

There was sadness at the homecoming when Juan led the remnants of his army to the plaza. The plaints, the grief of widows and orphans who at last gave up all hope were unbearable. Six hundred men out of a tough and determined army of two thousand had come home. A hundred more were with Ah Tok. A few of the wounded and some stragglers had returned earlier, but more than a thousand men of Chetumal, his men, lay lost and unburied in the jungle. The jungle could never again be a place of pure peace to Juan. It sheltered the bones of too many friends: Ah Ceh, Ah Itzam, Ah Chacah and others, many others. Ah Cuat had died by the lake, giving his life for Juan.

Juan dismissed his men, who rushed to their happy wives and children. With the cries of the widows still in his ears, Juan led his family to their own house by the sea. Its calm beauty closed about him, but still Juan could not find the contentment that had dwelt before in this house. The shadow of the sword hung over it. Some day the sword would fall.

Two soldiers of the king's guard were on duty outside the council chamber. It was an occasion for full dress, so plumes floated above their heads, their spears bore feathered tufts just below the points, and their round shields were gay with gold and with scarlet and green featherwork. They appeared to be silent and motionless, but with long practice they had learned to talk out of the corners of their mouths.

"Ah Puch! These big ones talk a long time," murmured the first. "When will this meeting end?"

"By Ixteb's noose, I wish I knew. They're angry, I can tell you that. Listen to that bull-alligator shout of the war captain, Ah Muan?"

"Aye, and the Gourd's last question. Who was he shouting at?"

"I heard him say: 'You feather-nosed old windbag!' to someone. I'll wager that was the Lord Serpent."

"Aiee! The high priest can summon the Alux to snatch a man's soul while his body lives, but the two white men fear neither . . ."

"Quiet! One comes."

The ornate doors were jerked open and they stepped quickly aside making hurried spear salutes as they did so. Ah Muan Kan and Ah Lec went swiftly away without turning, their sandal's hissing angrily on the stone, fury hanging in the air behind them. The two guards stiffened immediately to attention again as the king came out. They closed the door behind him on an uproar. He looked sadly after the two white men a moment, then followed them. The soldiers exchanged looks. "By Hunab Ku! There'll be things to talk about in the barracks!"

Juan and Valera turned into the king's garden. They stopped beside a pool.

"There you are," said Valera grimly. "No troops for us to lead to the north.".

"Hopeless, isn't it? Why can't they see, why can't they? By God! They want to keep all their men here to defend the city in case the white men come. *If* they come!"

"They don't know our countrymen as we do, Juan. I understand a little of what they feel. I feared this."

"Juan Valera, I will not lead naked men, armed with arrows and spears, against armored troops, in the open field! I felt like a murderer at Tizmin. I will *not* do it again! We must use the jungle as our armor. But why can't they see that cities can't be held?"

"I don't know, and I don't blame you, Juan. Jesus! Remember that cavalry charge that cut through our whole line? We lost twenty men to their one. But what can we do? Where can we go? All Yucatan is surely lost. If Chetumal should lead the way, we might be able to unite the Maya, but not now, not now. They'll all act just the way this city does."

Overhead a small flock of waterfowl whirred in from the bay. They flew low and fast, they swept across the sky toward the jungle to the southwest. Juan followed them with his eyes, and suddenly his despair was done and he looked at Valera with new hope.

"El Chato! Remember Tayasal? Remember those endless swamps, the mountains, the jungles? Let's go there. Now. Soon! Yes! Go there and take our families and friends. More, Valera, more. We'll take everyone who will go with us. We'll found our own nation and keep them safe!"

"Ahh. Perhaps we can, perhaps we can, Juan. I hope we can! But the king? What will he say? Will he approve?"

"Of what, Ah Lec? Of what will I approve?"

They turned at Nachan Can's words, and Juan walked to him, feeling his confidence rise as he did so. This man, this king, was his friend and a wise man. Juan spoke hopefully.

"Nachan Can, I would save Chetumal if I could. I would save all Yucatan if I could. But it is hopeless. Only a united country can face the white men, and that will never be. My own people have shown me that."

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to take my family, take all the people who will follow me and go to Tayasal to found a new city. Chetumal can live on there. The white men will never find the lost lake of the Itza."

The king looked at Juan, but in his mind he was following a jungle trail, a long difficult journey to a lake, safe and hidden, among the blue, jungle hills. He smiled.

"Good, my son! I know that evil will come here. My daughter will go with you; my blood will live on through you two and your children. This is a good plan, Ah Muan. I will do all I can. Canek will welcome you."

"What of you, True Man?"

"I will stay here. My nobles want to defend Chetumal. That, too, is good. A man must fight for his city. I will lead that fight, but I will be glad to know my blood goes on. I will send messengers at once to Tayasal. This makes my heart happy, Ah Muan. Straight be your road."

"And yours, True Man."

They were alone in the garden. Juan saw his own happiness reflected in Valera's face. The anger that had laid hold of Juan when Montejo landed in Yucatan was beginning to lift like fog burning up in the sun. He felt a great sadness for the Mayan people but behind the sadness his relief grew fast. Long ago he had felt that it was his mission, his responsibility not only to help the Mayan people, but to save them from conquest. He had not saved them from conquest. In that he had failed. But he would save some, and with them build, he hoped, a strong nation.

His task was done. He must relinquish this part of his mission with a clear conscience, and think of the peaceful years ahead, years of love with Ix Pat, years of teaching his children, years, perhaps, of greater fulfillment to his adopted people. There would be hunting in the jungle, fishing trips on new lakes and streams with campfires to sit around and enjoy at ease. There would be leisure to live.

He would remain a soldier. Probably the Spaniards would never reach Tayasal, but if they did, they'd find a welcome,

the only kind of welcome they understood. Juan turned to Valera.

"Get a move on, El Chato!" he said. "Stir yourself, partner, we're going to Tayasal!"

CHAPTER 26

Juan told Ix Pat of his plan. As he spoke, he had a new fear. What if she dreaded to leave and should carry unhappiness with her to the new place?

"What do you think of this, Pat? Are you ready to make a new home far away?"

She put her embroidery on the carved table and her gray eyes looked slowly over the cool, white room. The laughter of the Owl and Miguel came from the garden on which it opened, and beyond the garden was the sea. Its murmur had been an undertone to her life. Behind her was their sleeping room, a room of many memories, of great happiness. Her children had been born there. She looked at her husband who had followed her glance with growing uneasiness.

"I'm ready, Ah Muan. Everything that has made this a happy place will go with me. And in Tayasal you will be all mine. No longer will you belong to the Mayan people. You will belong only to me. I am happy to go, my husband."

When Valera reached home he was so full of enthusiasm that Ix Chen had to smile.

"You are my man. I will follow you anywhere."

Ah Tok came home with his hundred men. A light shone in his eyes when he heard of the plan. He went at once to his wife.

"Would you leave Chetumal, husband?" she asked.

"I would not like to. I would like to finish here a life that began here. But in Chetumal the future will be dark. If our daughter can live out her days in freedom, we must do everything possible. Then, too, there are Ah Muan and Ah Lec. Friends such as they can take the place even of a man's home and country. We shall go."

In the barracks two soldiers talked. One set an empty wine jar on the table, belched appreciatively, and said:

"Go? Yes, I go. I remember the Hawk at Tizmin. You sel-

dom find leaders like him. Where he goes, I go. And Tayasal is a good place."

"I was not at Tizmin, but at Champotan he was Ek Chuah himself. Before I leave, I'll find a young girl to take with me. Nowhere can you find better women than those of Chetumal."

"It may be so. But I was in Tayasal when Ah Muan married Ix Pat, and I was the whole time with a young widow so comely that I scarcely envied Ah Muan. She has a good house, too, with a rich field. If she still has no man, I'll take her. If she has a husband, there'll be other women. There always are."

Preparations were begun immediately. Once decided, there was no reason to delay, and every reason for haste. Ah Tok had made a quick journey after delivering Alisa to Montejo. At the time he left Tizmin the white men showed no signs of beginning a march. The trails to the north were screened with scouts who could get word to Chetumal several days before the Spanish could reach it. There seemed no immediate danger, but Juan was unable to eat or sleep in peace.

Without waiting for Canek's permission, he sent hundreds of bearers along the trail with food for supply depots. A thousand warriors, many of whom had fought under Juan, were the first to volunteer. They knew Juan, and they also knew the power of Spanish weapons and the cruelty of the white men. They were glad to move themselves and their families out of the conquerors' way. New land was scarce close to Chetumal and a thousand farmers with their families joined the migrants who would become the new nation. Few merchants, artisans or priests had joined the company as yet. They would be sorely needed, but they preferred to remain in Chetumal.

"Everyone who knows the way to Tayasal will be forced to go," said Nachan Can. "When you leave here, you must be dead to us, except in our hearts. We will spread the word that you, Ah Muan and Ah Lec, are dead of fever. None will know the way to your refuge and you must let no one return. That way you will be safe."

"You are right. So it will be," said Ah Muan. "Today has brought good fortune, my father. Ah Kukum has decided to accompany us."

"Good! He is a wise priest, though young. He would have risen high in Chetumal; he will make you a good high priest. I am glad, Ah Muan."

Before long, the first parties were on the long trail. Twenty slaves loaded with Juan and Ix Pat's most treasured possessions went with them.

"You will be True Man, Ah Muan," said Nachan Can. "A king must live in some luxury, and you will need all that you have taken. Feathered robes of state, for instance, require a year to make and your people will be busy building a city."

They were talking at Juan's villa. Nachan Can had dined with them, and afterwards, as they sat in the garden smoking, Ix Pat suddenly began to cry.

"What is it?" asked Juan, anxiously.

"This talk of a new city, a new life. Oh, Muan! I hate to leave here; most of all I hate to leave my father!"

Juan went to comfort her, but Nachan Can reached her first and embraced her.

"I'm glad you are sad at leaving me," he said tenderly, "else I would know that I had been a poor father to you. But you must listen to me, both of you, my children.

"Perhaps evil days will come to Chetumal and to all the Maya. You will escape this evil. This you must remember. A man who has lived a full life—as I have, and my friends—and who sees his children going on to a life as good, can face any evil with a light heart! Never reproach yourselves for leaving us. If you should stay, sharing with us miseries you could not prevent, our unhappiness would be far worse. Those who stay do so of their own free will. You must go in happiness and find happiness. It is wise if the new shoots of an old tree are sometimes carried afar to grow strong on their own, but if the tree itself is uprooted, it dies. So it is with me and with Chetumal. May my Lord Sun light all your days."

He kissed Ix Pat and the children and rose, a smile on his usually somber face.

"I must go, my children. You have not many evenings left in this house, and you must make the most of them. Farewell for now."

Next morning Juan and Ix Pat swam together on their beach, and lay together in the morning sun to dry. When they left to return to the house, they turned twice to look back at the beach.

That evening, after a day of organizing and packing, as the first coolness of the day drifted in from the sea, Juan was assisting the departure of another party of his people. He heard an uproar from the plazas, temples and palaces. From

where he stood he could see people blackening the steps of the temples. They were all looking in one direction: out to sea.

Juan knew then what they saw. He didn't need to be told by Valera, who came running.

"Ships, Juan! Ships, at least six of them. It must be Montejo!"

"Yes, and we're not prepared to go! Thank God we're as far along as we are. We have Canek's permission, and food is stored on the trail."

"They'll be here in an hour or two. We must get the people from the seaward houses. God, Juan! We must move our families at once!"

Chetumal soon resembled a disturbed ant hill. Men and women ran through the streets and plazas dragging crying children, carrying bundles. Warriors formed companies, and weapons were made ready. Juan moved his and Valera's family across town, to a heavy-walled barracks where they were quickly joined by the people from the houses near the sea.

"Some of them won't leave, Juan," said Valera. "They don't believe the ships can destroy their houses."

"I pity them. They will learn only too soon. I'm sorry for them but there is no more time. They have been warned. Another party is ready to go, and besides, we're getting recruits now, Valera. We're getting those artisans we needed—stone cutters, artists, masons, carpenters, weavers. They're ready to go now."

"They'll be poorly prepared."

"Aye. Many will go with only the clothes they wear and food for a few days. But we'll manage. Thank God we sent food ahead. We'll need it."

As the ships neared the shore, it began to grow dark. Juan watched them. He could see the leadsmen in the chains, and the crowded decks bristling with armor. A cloud of white sea birds soared and wheeled above them. It was low tide, but the first ship rode within two hundred paces of the beach before its anchor splashed into the water. The others anchored in a line roughly parallel to the shore, the length of the city. The tide, just beginning to flow, pushed the sterns around, and stern anchors were dropped from each ship.

"A bombardment, Valera! We must get to Nachan Can. All women and children—everybody—must get well away from the sea!"

As he spoke a long jet of gray-white smoke appeared at

the bow of the flagship with a flash of orange behind it, and even as the crash of the gun was echoed around the bay, the ball smashed into one of the seaside villas. The sea birds had settled on the water around the ships. Now they rose screaming into the air. In the doomed city, men and women shouted in terror. The Spaniards proceeded deliberately. One gun from each ship was fired before the first broadside from the whole fleet was delivered. When it came, it made a stunning impact on the Maya. Juan saw the House of the Pigeons crumple. Other houses, too, fell like cards. Walls collapsed, pillars toppled, cannon balls ricocheted from stone pyramids, wooden spinters flew and almost at once fires broke out in wooden houses.

Thunder rolled above the clouds of smoke from guns and from burning houses. Men shouted and women screamed. Lightning flashed across the bay, and rain poured down. The Spanish fire slackened with the coming night and the heavy rain. When it was pitch dark, only an occasional gun smashed its charge into the city.

It was a night of horror for Juan. Only twice was he able to visit his family. The children were terrified, and Ix Pat hugged them close to her. They sat with Ix Chen and her child near their litters, ready at a moment's notice to go.

"Oh, Muan!" sobbed Ix Pat. "Now I know what you faced in the north! Why do the gods allow men such weapons? Stay with me, my man!"

But Juan couldn't stay. He and Valera comforted their families as best they could, wrapped their wet cloaks about their tired bodies and went out into the heavy rain again. Together they groped their way to the temple. Behind its heavy walls they found Nachan Can and his war captain, Ah Huitz. Nachan Can's face was weary and sad, but his lips were firm as ever. Juan went to him at once.

"You see, my father? You see what we face?"

"Yes. I see. What do you advise, Ah Muan?"

"You cannot hold the city. Abandon it tomorrow. Take all the food with you. Send the women and children into the jungle and keep the warriors between them and the white men. After the city is destroyed, I think Montejo will return to the north."

"Perhaps you are right, Ah Muan, but I hate the thought of giving up our city. We shall see what men can do against these weapons."

"I'll stay and help."

"No! By Hunab Ku, no! Ah Huitz knows your tactics well.

You couldn't change the outcome, and I'm depending on you to take away those of my people who want to leave. You must keep them safe, Ah Muan, you must found a new Chetumal and keep my people alive. You march in the morning. That is an order! I will listen to no more words."

All during the night parties left, wet and frightened men and women, small children in litters and older children walking, each with a bundle. There was no time for farewells. Tears and raindrops ran down wet cheeks as families and friends parted forever. By dawn only Juan, Valera, their families and a rear guard of three hundred soldiers of the émigrés remained in Chetumal.

"It is time, my son," said Nachan Can.

He kissed the children and sat them in their litter. He and Ix Pat embraced, and she joined her children. Valera's wife and child were in their litter.

"Farewells should not be long drawn out," said the king. "But I will accompany you a little way. Come, my children. Let us go."

As they walked out of the dry barracks into the driving rain, followed by a long line of soldiers laden with everything they could carry, they heard the first cannon fire. The Owl cried and was quickly silenced. The bombardment increased until the air was shaken either from a report or from the echoes of a report rolling around the bay.

At the edge of the jungle Nachan Can halted. Juan stopped his party, and let the soldiers file by. When they had passed, the king embraced Juan and Valera, leaned inside the litter to kiss Ix Pat and the children once more, then he motioned the bearers away. His face was wet, his plumes drooped as he stood in the rain and mud, but he still looked a king, a man of power and dignity. Juan and Valera followed the litters down the trail. Fifty yards along they looked back. Nachan Can still stood with his hand upraised in farewell. He was seeing his youth, his hope, and his happiness walk away from him down a jungle trail. Behind him, the guns growled unceasingly, and even through the rain, smoke rose to the murky sky.

Juan's party struggled on through the rain, weary with the long night and deeply sad. After awhile, walking on the trail was like wading in a brook. For many miles that day, Juan's people pushed on through the jungle. This was the beginning of the flight to Tayasal and a new life.

Behind them there was the fading roar of bombardment. They marched in silence except for the rustle of the rain, the

slush of feet in the mud and an occasional muttering rebirth of the sound of the guns, strengthened by a slant of wind. At last they heard it no more. There was no sound to remind them that Chetumal was falling.

For days at a stretch they saw only patches of sky through the luxuriant leaves, branches and tangled vines. The soldiers were the first warning to the villages on the trail, and as soon as the people recognized the signs of flight, they began to pack. They joined the long cavalcade. Last of all, no matter how long the line grew, came a group of skilled woodsmen who planted fast growing trees on the trail: thorn bushes and the arrowy bamboo seedlings. It made little immediate difference, but after the next rainy season, no eye would be able to tell where the trail had been. Not a living person was left along the way in or outside any village.

They waded through endless swamps, and only the men who lived all their lives near them knew the way.

"We can forget our weapons, Juan. No army could follow us through here. Even if they knew the way, armored men would die, or would throw away their guns and armor."

"Aye. They would. And we have still many miles of jungle and swamp as well as mountains. It feels good to me. Each swamp, each mile of jungle, each hill makes me feel more secure."

Once they went through jungles so fast growing that men of villages along the trail worked every day cutting a trail. They and their families joined the emigrés. They climbed mountain ranges whose gorges and canyons were choked with tangled vegetation. The rear guard started rock slides behind them across the trail. High liana bridges were detached to crash into the gorges below after the people had crossed over.

After thirty more days Juan and Ix Pat saw again the blue water of the lake of the Itza shining through the trees at sunset. They also saw, as they had before their marriage, the campfires of Canek who had come to meet them. His welcome was warm and sincere.

They spent the next night in the city of Tayasal where room was made in homes, temples or barracks for every person from Chetumal. To sleep in beds again and to eat well-cooked food at tables was pure luxury. Yet they were not at peace in spite of the friendly welcome, because they did not sleep in their own homes, because they had no cornfields, and the food they ate they had not raised.

Canek—a Maya and therefore at heart a corn planter

himself—realized this. On the third day after their arrival land was apportioned among them by the True Man.

Directly across the lake from Tayasal was an island a mile long and a half-mile wide. In the center was a high, flat hill. The soil was good. Part of it was well-wooded, and there were a number of large springs. Canek pointed out the island to Juan.

"There you shall build your city, Golden Hawk. There is room aplenty. The south shore of the lake is only five hundred paces beyond it and it is uninhabited. Your people may plant their corn in fields as large as they can clear."

"On the hilltop we can build our temples, and I shall have a villa by the lake. We shall have a home again! Already, Canek Itza, my debt to you is beyond reckoning. A lifetime as your servant will leave me still your debtor!"

"No, not servant, friend. Friend and son! There is room here for everyone. You have seven thousand people, most of them young. Your numbers will grow and Tayasal will be stronger and safer for your presence. We are happy to have you."

There was joy among the exiles when they were told of their new land and taken to it, so that they could mark off their fields. Each man chose about thirty acres according to his taste and judgment. The Sun Men came with their maps and measuring ropes and surveyed the fields, marking them off in exact squares of the proper size. The fields were cleared and the brush left to dry in the sun.

In a few weeks, there was so much eagerness and so many willing hands, the town was laid out and the sites of the temples marked on the hill. A reservoir was planned so that the new town could have fountains in its plaza and gardens. Juan and Ix Pat together found the spot where their new home would be built—a beautiful level stretch of land on the north shore of the island, shaded by ceiba trees and palms. Across the water they could see Tayasal. Between the house and the lake was a magnificent white beach. A brook ran along one side of where the house would be. Juan invited Valera to build on the right, and Ah Tok on the left. A new quarry of limestone was opened and lime kilns began to send smoke skyward, night and day. The new town began to rise, and Tayasal sent thousands of workmen to help the men of Chetumal.

"What will you call your town, Ah Muan?" asked Canek.

"I've thought about that, but I'm not sure. Ix Pat, what do you say?"

Ix Pat looked down to the lakeshore where a flower-covered floating island drifted slowly by. She smiled.

"I spent the happiest time I'll ever know on this lake. I would like to call our new home 'Yaxkin,' in honor of that time, and to show the happiness I hope will come to all who live here."

"Good!" said Juan. "You think as I do. Yaxkin it shall be."

The word spread and the people smiled. "Yaxkin." They tasted it on their lips.

"We are people of Yaxkin—people of the Sun Time. It is well."

Now the farmers left the rising buildings of the city to burn their fields clean before the rains came, and when the rains came, broad smiles were on every face. Men rose early to get their planting sticks and seed bags ready.

When the first corn appeared above the ground, the people of Yaxkin ceased to feel like strangers in a new land. They were at home. Now their roots were in the new earth.

Juan and Valera intended to keep this peace and this beauty. They kept the troops in training. Scouting detachments were always abroad, spreading a net of warning around the country. Any man who entered the country was captured and made to remain. An occasional raiding party from savage, warlike tribes was destroyed. Juan and Valera had not fought shoulder to shoulder for the last time, but neither were they ever again to see a massacre like their last jungle fight against the Spanish cavalry.

It was 4 Manic 1 Zip, the fourth of September, and the corn was high. Temples, barracks, observatories and villas were shining new among the trees and flowers of the island. The villages in the jungle were ready. Their papalnas had already known Hetzmek and puberty celebrations. Juan's people flourished like a healthy plant transplanted to rich new soil. New babies played in gardens and children grew fat and strong.

In gratitude to Hunab Ku, Juan and his high priest decreed this day as a day to name the city, to thank the gods and to celebrate. In Yaxkin there was no human sacrifice. Only fruit and flowers and featherwork lay upon the altars of the gods. Joy reigned among the people of the city. Wine flowed everywhere. The soldiers danced the dance of the warriors in the streets. Every table was laden with food and wine. The flag of the city, a sun blazing on a blue background, was raised from all the rooftops.

Juan and his friends gathered in the garden of his new

villa around a large table that was hidden by the feast that lay upon it.

"You feast your man too well, Ix Pat," said Valera. "Soon he will grow so great a paunch he will waddle."

"That is my intention, Ah Lec. I must find some way to keep him at home with me," said Ix Pat.

Juan was so happy he could hardly eat. He looked down the long table to Ix Pat and smiled. She returned both his look and his smile. Valera, looking almost mellow, sat by her side. Across the table was Ah Tok, his hard face merry and relaxed. The Dove and Ix Chen smiled at Juan and at their husbands.

The feasting began, and Valera looked up from his full plate and caught Juan's eye. He stood up, picked up his goblet of wine and raised it.

"Juan Moncada, a toast. Moncada and Castille!"

They drained their cups.

Late in the afternoon Juan and Valera, accompanied by their families, climbed the hill behind the house. They rested in a shady spot near the base of the temple of Kukulkan. The town was white below them, and beyond it was the lake. In the hazy distance they could see the pyramids of Tayasal.

Just as the last sunshine touched roofs and trees—the happiest time of day always for Juan—Juan knew that he was purged of bitterness. He had reached that maturity where a man realizes that he cannot unlock the design that governs the universe. He knew that happiness lies in the multitude of small things of everyday life.

What happens, happens, and tragedy may often lead to good.

Juan Valera stood holding his small son who looked up at him.

Ix Pat leaned against her husband and put a loving arm around his waist. The Owl came running with a new flower she had picked.

"See, father? See the flower? Isn't it wonderful?"

The answer came through Juan Moncada's lips from his heart.

"Yes, my daughter. Everything's wonderful!"

Dusk grew purple-gray. The Moon Goddess looked over the jungle, and her red-gold light touched the lake. Hand in hand with Ix Pat, his children and his friends around him, Juan Moncada—the Golden Hawk—went down the hill to home.

EPILOGUE

Montejo destroyed Chetumal, driving its people into the jungle. When he returned to the north with his fleet, the people returned to rebuild the city on its blood-stained ruins. A revolt broke out in the north where the Maya could endure their slavery no longer. At its height, word reached the armies of Montejo of the fabulous treasures Pizarro had discovered in Peru. Montejo's forces melted away as his men, sick of the wounds and hardships in Yucatan, departed after the gold of the Inca. No Spaniards were left in Yucatan when Montejo finally withdrew to Vera Cruz.

For a time the Maya were united and strong. Then old hatreds were rekindled and the Cocom murdered the leader of the Xiu nation. Again the country was divided and war raged. Montejo returned, and soon thereafter Yucatan was a Spanish province.

Priests had churches built. The altars to Hunab Ku, Kukulkan and Yum Chac were destroyed. The cross was erected on the pyramids. At the height of their bigotry, the priests also condemned every Mayan book that could be found.

"Obviously works of the devil," was their verdict after examining the smooth, colorful pages of their books.

Every book was burned.

"And it would have surprised you," wrote one priest, "to see how much these heathen sorrowed over the destruction of their books!"

At the same time a Mayan chronicler preserved the event in his words: "Then in sorrow and despair the sons of men felt the yoke on their shoulders; bowed their heads to the noose."

Temples crumbled. The jungle swept over the cities. Soon, all that was left were small villages of corn planters, driven to an alien church. Within three generations men bearing the proud name of Itza and Xiu lived in crude huts by small fields and worked their lives away with no knowledge of the greatness that had been theirs. They had no feeling of it, except for half-forgotten, dreamlike longings, inherited memories of power. The gods of the Maya had fallen; their altars had passed away.

But not in Tayasal and Yaxkin. There Hunab Ku lived on with the Feathered Serpent. Chac and Yum Chac brought life and strength to the Mayan corn planters who planted their fields, ate their food, raised their children and lived in the simple, happy ways of their ancestors. Juan Moncada and his friends lived out their lives in contentment, plenty and peace, seeing their children and their grandchildren grow up around them. For one hundred and seventy-five years the last of the Itza kings ruled over these outpost cities of the Mayan civilization.

Today, jungle moss and bush grow above the once-smooth stones of the house of Ah Muan Kan and Ix Pat as well as over the temples of Kukulkan, Chac, Yum Chac and Hunab Ku. Only the jungle and its creatures have conquered.

THE END

I should like to acknowledge my indebtedness to the following works:

William Beebe's *Jungle Peace;* William H. Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico;* Lawrence Dame's *Yucatan;* and, above all, Sylvanus G. Morley's magnificent work, *The Ancient Maya.*

I also want to express my gratitude to Miss Christine Aiken, who helped me when I needed help, giving me the benefit of wide personal experience in the form of expert advice, assistance and encouragement.

Now that you have finished this book, you will probably be interested in other POPULAR LIBRARY editions of successful novels and non-fiction (formerly priced at $2 or more) now obtainable in this format at 25c and in POPULAR LIBRARY GIANTS form at 35c per copy on all newsstands. Published by POPULAR LIBRARY, INC., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

25c POPULAR LIBRARY

CAPTIVE OF THE MAYAS

His family struck down by the Inquisition, the woman he loves snatched from his arms, hot-blooded Juan de Moncada sets out on a savage mission of revenge.

In the New World he is taken captive by the Mayas — with their strange rites of human sacrifice.

How he becomes the lover of a native princess and leads her people against the brutal Conquistadors makes a taut tale of swashbuckling adventure and primitive passion.

"INTENSELY INTERESTING" *New York TIMES*

"TRAGIC AND CRUEL"
Columbia RECORD

PRINTED IN
THE UNITED STATES

566

CRADLE OF THE SUN

LOVE AND REVENGE IN A PAGAN LAND

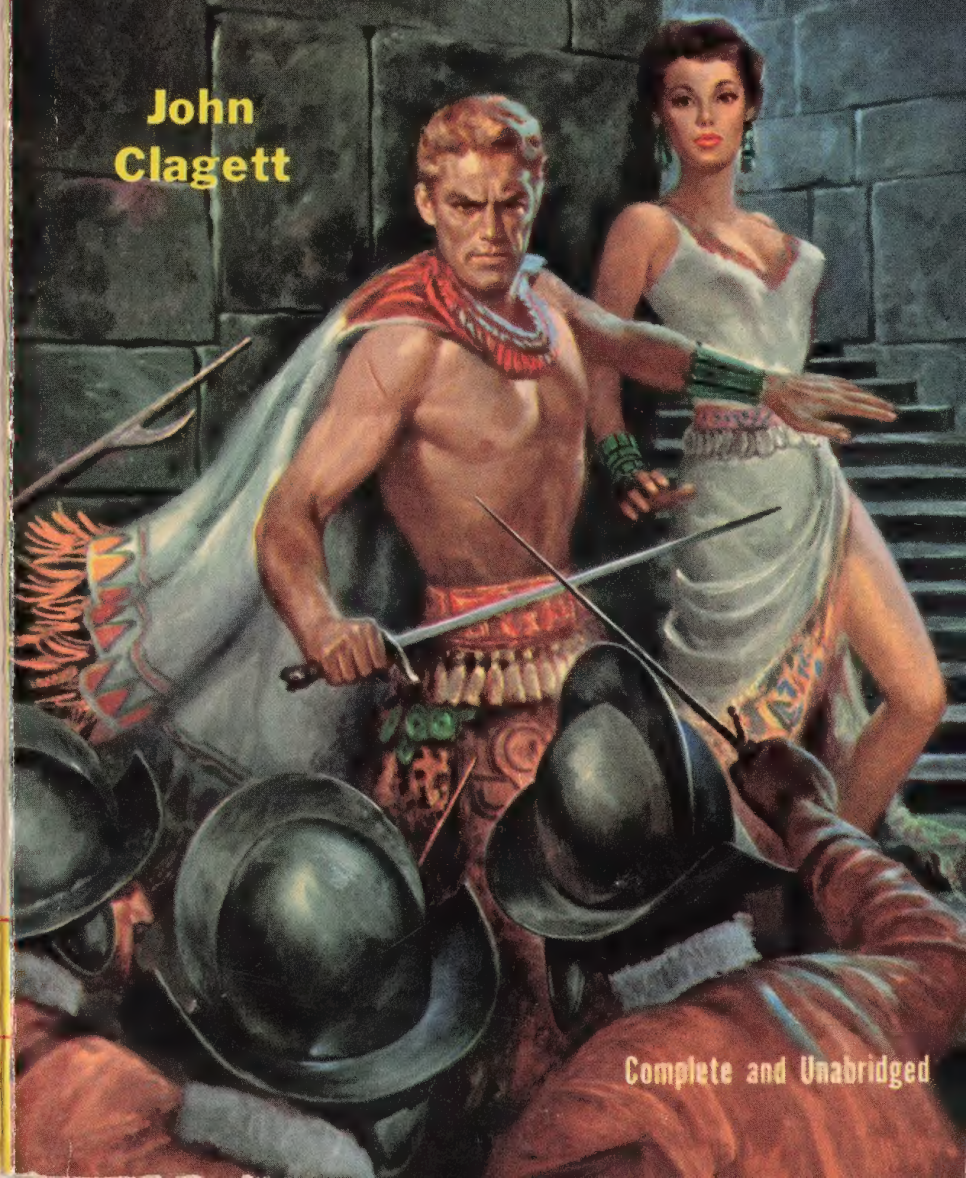
POPULAR LIBRARY 25c

POPULAR LIBRARY 25c Love And Revenge In A Pagan Land

566

CRADLE OF THE SUN

John Clagett



Complete and Unabridged